No. 643) For Week Ending April 27th, 1901. (One Penny.

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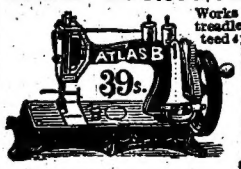

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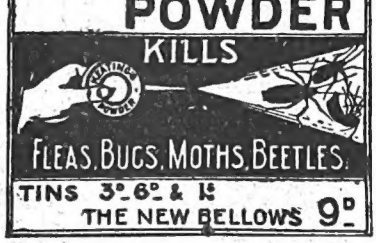

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SHORT STORIES.

No. 643.] For the Week Ending April 27th, 1901. [ONE PENNY.

A Keeper of Secrets

By R. NORMAN SILVER.

Being Days in the Professional Life of the late Mr. Hugo Pontifex, the Famous West-end Solicitor.

To those who had only met him casually in Society, the late Mr. Pontifex was a good-tempered mystery. Bluff, handsome, and, in spite of his middle-age, a little of a dandy, he seemed the last man in the world to deserve his reputation, which was that of the keenest, most audacious, and unerring of family lawyers. Fair-haired, and powerful as an athlete, his striking appearance was increased by his eyes, one of which was grey and one blue.

In reality, however, Hugo Pontifex had a wide and almost exclusively aristocratic practice. He seldom briefed a barrister, seldom set foot in a court of justice, but single handed he hunted down, captured, and safely buried mystery after mystery of terrible import to Mayfair and Belgravia.

An expert in strangling scandal, he lived a life of enthralling interest, and died a rich man. When his executors went through his papers they found nothing to satisfy their curiosity, though plenty to excite it. Hugo Pontifex knew the value of fire—and the dangers of ink. But from time to time he related to the writer, who enjoyed a certain measure of his confidence, the incidents which form the basis of the following stories. In speaking of these strange fragments of drama, Mr. Pontifex himself employed fictitious names, the present author being left to guess vainly at the identity of the genuine actors.

HIS LORDSHIP AND THE DANCER.

ELEANOR COUNTESS OF STANTON first visited Mr. Pontifex one pleasant afternoon in May. It was not yet four by the little gilt timepiece on the lawyer's writing-table, but his client was attired in all the glory of full dress, with a sweeping court-train of black velvet and a coronet of diamonds upon her silver tresses. She had driven round by St. James' Street to interview the great solicitor on her way from Buckingham Palace and the most brilliant Drawing Room of the season.

The Countess was an imposing figure, though her height was diminished by a marked tendency to stoutness and by a limp that necessitated the aid of the ebony stick with which she walked. Mr. Pontifex bowed her to a seat, into which she sank with the air of an empress—Eleanor, Countess of Stanton came of a line that quartered the Royal Arms of England with their own.

"Mr. Pontifex," she said gravely, "you may well marvel at receiving a call from me, without notice and in this costume. But the truth is that the matter upon which I desire your advice and assistance has unexpectedly reached a crisis. At the Drawing Room to-day it was being openly reported that a breach of promise action against my son, the Earl of Stanton, was about to be initiated by—by Miss Cora Shaw, of the Regency Theatre."

The lawyer's singular eyes rested sympathetically upon the proud face of this aristocratic dame in the carved-oak chair. The delicate features of the Countess were sad yet determined. There was the sensitive strength of high breeding in every line of the still handsome countenance.

"I presume," answered Mr. Pontifex, looking thoughtfully into the splendid sapphire of his ring, "that there is some foundation—however trifling—for the rumour."

"There is," confessed the Countess, "for this woman, Mr. Pontifex—this Cora Shaw—my son, unfortunately, happened to conceive a romantic passion. An honourable passion," she added, sternly; "my son is a chivalrous gentleman. He saw her at the play, fell in love with her, obtained an introduction, and wooed her as loyally as if she had been of his own rank. He believed her to be, as he is, noble, generous, pure—she might have been all these, and yet have been on the stage; I am no bigot, Mr. Pontifex."

The solicitor surveyed his client. "You are extremely and unusually fair-minded, madam," he conceded.

"I even hoped," said the Countess, "she would prove all that Stanton imagined her to be, since I realized the probable futility of seeking to thwart his attachment. Nevertheless, when I learnt of Stanton's interest in her—for he was perfectly frank with me—I ventured on a few discreet inquiries. You will guess the result. Cora Shaw is an unprincipled adventuress, and known as such in every capital in Europe. Finally, a year ago, she went on the stage, and, with a single novel

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dance in the new comic opera at the Regency, has taken the town by storm."

"Your information," commented Mr. Pontifex, "is ample—and correct."

"Of course," continued his client, "I did not question either Stanton's candour or his intelligence. He was in love, and love blindfolds all of us. But I got together my proofs and laid them in Stanton's hands. The blow was cruel, Mr. Pontifex; hearts do not break, perhaps, but nerves snap frequently. My poor Stanton testified by a severe attack of brain fever, the depth of the devotion which he had felt for Miss Shaw."

The lawyer sighed, and began to twist the ornament

"I have achieved more difficult tasks," Pontifex replied.

on his finger. The late sunshine glimmered in its gem of glorious azure.

"During Stanton's illness," proceeded the Countess, "no communication of any sort was held with Miss Shaw. I fancied it wiser, not being quite certain what progress, if any, my son had made with his suit. Then, on his recovery, the doctors forbade any immediate reference to the subject. Not till a week or two back was I able to ask him if there had been any actual engagement between Miss Shaw and himself. To my alarm, he admitted that just prior to my disastrous discoveries he had proposed marriage, in a letter, and that she had accepted him."

"Verbally?" asked Mr. Pontifex, pausing in his contemplation of the sapphire.

"Verbally," assented his client; "is it of any importance?"

"It saves us the trouble of destroying a written response," declared the solicitor, coolly, "did you discover whether the Earl, in previous missives, had spoken of marriage?"

"He said not," answered the Countess; "they had been so much together that any correspondence took the form of brief notes, affectionate no doubt, but chiefly relating to appointments. Stanton did not offer her marriage in ignorance of the social catastrophe which he was challenging; he assured me that he had reflected carefully upon it, and that not till he was convinced of her sterling worth, did he, in the letter of which I told you, mention matrimony."

"We must positively have that letter," murmured Hugo Pontifex, and he gazed absently at the dial of the gilt timepiece on his table.

"To avoid a scandal," said Eleanor, Countess of Stanton, eagerly, "I will pay ——."

The lawyer interrupted her. "Pay nothing at all," he advised; "at least for such a foolish reason. Money may have to be spent as a part of a game whose success will effectively suppress the scandal you fear. But bribery is a confession of weakness; avoid it like the plague."

"I did not intend to suggest your bribing her," corrected his client coldly; "I meant that her claim for damages must, at any cost, be privately satisfied."

Mr. Pontifex smiled. "In that case," he said, "your own solicitors will serve your purpose admirably; I trust the astute Cora may not plunder you too unmercifully." And he reached towards the bell at his elbow.

The Countess bit her lip. "Sir," she rejoined, "you misunderstand me; I did not desire to dictate to you. I have every cause to study economy in this luckless affair. During his convalescence my son has been nursed by his cousin, Lady Lilian Ingram. The friendship, broken by Stanton's passion for Miss Shaw, has been revived, and, happily, has ripened into love."

The peeress paused and coloured slightly. "The match," she pursued, "has been my dearest ambition. Lady Lilian is, however, a daughter of the Marquis of Crosby, and we shall have to bring a considerable sum into the settlement. Yet a scandal over this Miss Shaw must be prevented, regardless of expense. Stanton has confessed all to Lilian, but her father, the Marquis, remains in ignorance. A law-suit might break off the marriage."

The lawyer drew a deep breath. His attention had been aroused. There was more at stake than he had imagined. To grapple with problems whose issues involved the peace and prosperity of famous families afforded him a peculiar delight. He paused for a moment. The Countess waited patiently.

"Madam," he decided, "I will deal with Miss Cora Shaw. In other words, I will secure that compromising letter, and definitely prevent her prosecuting her breach of promise action. To do so I shall merely require to spend some five hundred pounds; the pretty and unscrupulous dancer herself is probably estimating the loss of a coronet at twenty times the amount."

His client gasped. "You will work this miracle?" she cried.

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Mr. Pontifex rose. "I have achieved more difficult tasks," he replied; "as for the gossips, I should recommend that you announce, forthwith, the engagement of Lord Stanton to Lady Lilian."

"It shall be in the *Morning Post* to-morrow," the Countess said.

Hugo Pontifex had lost himself in a sudden reverie. "Audacity is the larger portion of success," he observed; "let your son and his future wife also appear to-night in a box at the Regency Theatre. The rumour of Miss Shaw's intention to appeal to the law will seem incredible in view of their joint presence at her performance."

The Countess of Stanton considered the idea. "It is a bold stroke, Mr. Pontifex," she demurred; "yet it shall be done—if we can get a box."

The solicitor lifted the receiver from his telephone and rang up the Regency Theatre. A box was free, Mr. Pontifex ordered it to be reserved in the name of the Countess.

"That will set them wondering at the theatre," he concluded; "and now au revoir; I shall be at the Regency myself to-night."

"I trust you may enjoy your evening's entertainment," the Countess told him stiffly, as if to warn him that, great lawyer as he was, his movements were of trifling significance to her.

"I anticipate a truly diverting experience," said Hugo Pontifex, grimly, and showed his aristocratic visitor to her brougham.

As it bore away the haughty peeress Mr. Pontifex regained his comfortable apartment.

"Don't let me be disturbed," he called to his deaf clerk, and passing in, shut the door.

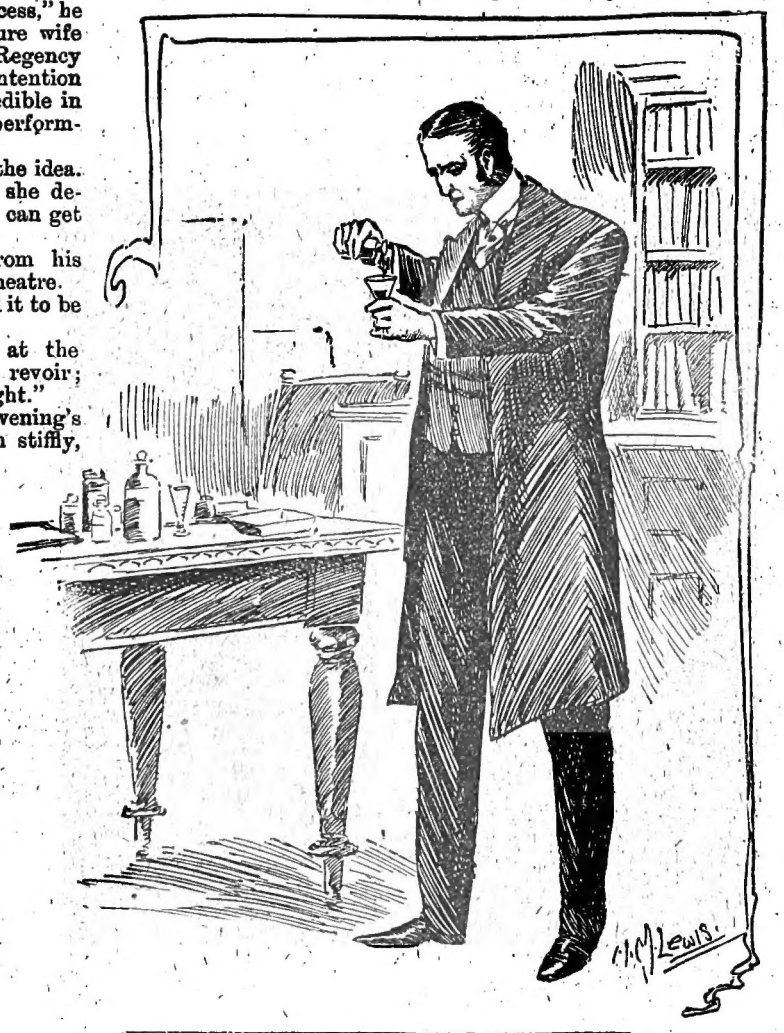
Then he approached the small safe of which he alone kept the key. Unlocking and opening it, he got out a tray of chemicals, and, at a leisurely rate, mixed several ingredients in a shallow dish.

The result was a dark fluid, much resembling ink. With this he filled the vulcanite barrel of a fountain-pen—a pen decorated pretentiously by bands of chased gold. Another pen of a rather similar pattern he charged with the ordinary blue-black fluid from a stone bottle. A shrewd spectator of these various processes would have noticed that there was a difference in the gold mountings of the two pens. For the rest, they were identical.

Stowing the prepared instruments in his vest pockets, the solicitor unfastened an inner drawer in the safe, and, producing a roll of notes, counted out a batch of twenty-five. The notes, being for twenty pounds each, represented a total value of five hundred—the exact sum of which he had made mention to the Countess. Mr. Pontifex secreted the packet of crisp sheets about his person, and, smiling meditatively, closed the safe and secured it.

For an hour afterwards he attended to his customary correspondence. Later, dress-case in hand, he walked to his club, where he dined peacefully. The meal finished, he changed into his evening garments, not forgetting to transfer to them his fountain-pens and the bulky package of notes.

Ultimately, the porter at the club whistled him a cab, and Mr. Pontifex entered it with an air of contentment which harmonized very creditably with his real emotions. Hugo Pontifex was seldom in such good humour with himself as on the edge of those curious gambles whose chances he fathomed so unerringly that he appeared to control them.



At a leisurely rate he mixed several ingredients in a shallow dish.

He alighted at the stage entrance of the Regency, tipped its surly guardian a florin, and desired that his card might be sent up to Miss Shaw. On it he had inscribed his profession and the diplomatic words "Re a legacy." It is not an easy matter to interview a popular actress a few minutes before the rise of the curtain.

The door-keeper looked critically at the pasteboard

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and delivered it to a sharp lad, who, in his turn, scrutinized Mr. Pontifex's message as he lounged with it into the dusky corridors of the house. When the latter returned it was with the request that the lawyer would follow him.

Mr. Pontifex, prompted now and again by his guide, stalked cautiously among the stumbling blocks of the wings, ascended a winding staircase and crossed a narrow threshold to find himself face to face with Miss Cora Shaw. She was tall and fair, with a Greek profile, sparkling brown orbs, dazzling teeth and a red and selfish mouth. Her short, full skirts and a big and nodding hat, showed that she was ready for her call. Her attendant—an elderly woman—was just closing the last button of an elbow-high glove.

"Well," demanded the actress; "and what good news is in the wind now, Mr.—Mr. Pontefract?"

"Pontifex," begged the solicitor smilingly; "and, if you have no objection, Miss Shaw, my business could be more expeditiously transacted in the absence of a third party."

"Tizeck," said Cora Shaw bluntly; "get out." The attendant obeyed, glancing inquisitively at Hugo Pontifex as she disappeared. The lawyer dropped into a chair by the actress' toilet-stand, got out his packet of notes and began to count them. Cora Shaw watched him impatiently, her eyes shining with ill-disguised greed.

"Twenty-three, twenty-four, twenty-five," he ended, fluttering the final sheet, "five hundred pounds in all."

The actress held out her hand, excitedly. "How nice!" she said, "but who is the kind soul that's left me the shekels?"

Hugo Pontifex restored the notes to his pocket. "You must pardon my fib about the legacy, Miss Shaw," he told her. "To be frank, this payment is merely in earnest of a much larger amount, and from a living, not a dead client. What would you say to a gift of ten thousand pounds?"

Cora Shaw broke into a scream of ecstasy. "Oh," she intreated, "tell me all about it, quick—I've to go on in a second or two."

"This ten thousand pounds, Miss Shaw," he began, but arrested himself to whisper to ask: "Can you guarantee us free from eavesdroppers?"

The actress crept to the door and peeped through the keyhole. "There is no one spying," she reported, "but you may speak low—other rooms adjoin mine."

Mr. Pontifex bent his head assentingly.

"This ten thousand," he continued, "is offered on her son's behalf by the Countess of Stanton, in reparation of Lord Stanton's breach of his promise to marry you."

Cora Shaw clapped her gloved palms.

"I thought I'd frighten them," she said, in her crisp American accent; "but see here, I only told my attorneys to go ahead this morning. They can't have fired a shot yet."

"The Countess heard a rumour and consulted me instantly," explained the solicitor. "A match is being arranged between the Earl and his cousin, Lady Lilian Ingram. Her ladyship is afraid of any scandal, and, though the estate really cannot bear the tax, I persuaded her to allow me to propose, on conditions, the lavish terms I have outlined. The conditions are that you do not betray the source whence you receive the money, that you authorize me to deny the report of a previous engagement between you and the Earl, and that you hand me over, at once, the epistle in which he offered you marriage."

It was blank. She uttered a cry of astonishment.

Cora Shaw knitted her brows; Mr. Pontifex produced casually his packet of notes and toyed with them.

"Five hundred down in exchange for that single missive," he said temptingly; "and the balance of ten thousand within a month. I merely stipulate that you shall instruct your legal advisers to abandon all proceedings against Lord Stanton. If you will oblige me with some letter-paper I will scrawl an agreement to that

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effect, and also one binding me to pay you the remainder of the ten thousand. Remember, if we fight you may lose."

There was a stentorian warning in the corridor. "Miss Shaw!—the stage waits for Miss Shaw!"

The actress caught up her cloak. "I'll do it," she said; "the call-boy shall get you some paper and I will send Tizeck for the letter. When I come off again we will fix it."

"You have an excellent brain for business," Mr. Pontifex responded, opening the door for her gallantly. She laughed, muttered a rapid order to her dresser, and hurried, a gaudy figure, along the dingy passage.

The elderly woman donned her hat and jacket and marched off, while a diminutive youth brought Mr. Pontifex a quire of the Regency letter-paper and the usual writing-materials. The lawyer settled himself to draft a succinct memorandum of the compact at which he had arrived. Previously to doing so he emptied the contents of the theatre ink-pot out of a window and took to one of his fountain-pens—that which he had filled with a special blend of chemicals. A briefer contract has seldom been seen than that evolved by Mr. Pontifex. It ran:

> I, Cora Shaw, in consideration of the sum of ten thousand pounds (£10,000) of which five hundred pounds (£500) is now paid, do hereby release William Godfrey, Earl of Stanton, from his promise to marry me.

He dated it and laid the small folio to dry, after inspecting closely his own characters. While it was doing so he wrote another:

> I, Hugo Pontifex, solicitor, of St. James' Street, London, W., do undertake, on behalf of William Godfrey, Earl of Stanton, to pay to Miss Cora Shaw, within one month from date, the sum of nine thousand five hundred pounds (£9,500).

Placing this by the first contract, he had recourse to his alternative fountain-pen, and partially covered with his neat caligraphy a third folio of the Regency letter-paper. He blotted this, folded it deliberately, and slipped it into the square cuff of his shirt-sleeve. The two earlier folios he left where they were.

These operations lasted for some twenty minutes, and then Miss Cora Shaw's quick step sounded without.

"Here we are," she said, holding up a letter for the solicitor to scan; "this is his lordship's bid for the Regency Belle, isn't he prim? Say, do you know he is in the front, with his mother, and—I reckon—my rival? Stennie's got a nerve to fetch her round. Not that I ever was gone on him—but I couldn't resist a coronet if a nigger wore it. Come, Mr. Ponti—what's-your-name—buy it back from me, and then Stennie can give it to who he likes."

The lawyer gave her the draft contracts to read. "They'll do," she sniffed; "I'll sign mine," and she looked for a pen.

"One moment," said Hugo Pontifex; "you must sign in the presence of a witness. Your dresser will do, I can fold over the sheet."

"What a lot of bother!" frowned the actress, but she went to call her attendant. In a twinkling Mr. Pontifex snapped up the first of the folios and substituted for it—folded—that which he had concealed in his cuff. Miss Cora Shaw appearing with the necessary witness, the solicitor gave her a fountain pen.

"Luckily I use one," he said; "there was no ink in the stand they brought me."

The actress took the instrument and appended her name to the bottom of the partly-folded sheet; then yielded the pen to her dresser, who signed underneath. Mr. Pontifex took the pen with a bow, and dashed off his signature at the foot of another sheet, the dresser witnessing that also in due form.

As this process terminated the lawyer glanced at the door, it seemed, expectantly. Nothing happening, he contrived to drop the signed folios on the floor and stooped to pick them up.

"Miss Shaw!" came a drawling summons, Mr. Pontifex was upright in an instant.

"Here are your notes, Miss Shaw," he murmured; "and here, in exchange for the letter, is my contract to pay the balance of ten thousand in a month."

His manner was curiously bustling and peremptory.

The call-boy's voice sounded again.

"The stage waits for Miss Shaw!"

The actress thrust the folded papers and notes into her corsage and hastened out of the apartment.

Hugo Pontifex sat down and laughed—to the wonderment of Miss Cora Shaw's dresser.

"I shall need to speak with your mistress again," he observed; "the act doesn't last much longer, I think."

"About a quarter of an hour, sir," said the attendant. "Have you seen the piece?"

"Fortunately, yes," answered the solicitor; "I may admit, *very* fortunately. I recollect perfectly Miss Shaw's exits and entrances." He got out his match-box, tore up the Earl's epistle and a couple of folios of Regency letter-paper, written on, and burnt them contemplatively.

"That is against the rules of the theatre, sir," objected the dresser. But Mr. Pontifex only smiled and gave her a sovereign.

Suddenly there was a patter of feet in the corridor—the act had ended. Miss Cora Shaw returned flushed and panting after a double encore.

"You still here!" she cried.

"I forgot a trifling detail," responded the lawyer. "A word in private and you will be rid of me."

The actress motioned to her attendant, and Hugo Pontifex was once more alone with the dancer.

"You have a paper in your bosom," he said, "oblige me by looking at it."

Puzzled, the actress drew out the folded document he had given her a quarter of an hour before.

"Open it," requested the solicitor. Cora Shaw obeyed. It was blank! She uttered a cry of astonishment.

"Listen to this," said Mr. Pontifex, opening a sheet of the Regency paper.

> I, Cora Shaw, do admit that there never was any contract of marriage between myself and Lord Stanton and, on condition that I am not prosecuted for slander, undertake that his lordship shall never be further troubled by me or my legal advisers.

"It is signed by you," commented the solicitor, "and witnessed by Mary Tizeck, your dresser. Miss Shaw I have the honour to wish you good-evening. You are five hundred pounds richer and I have made a bonfire of a dangerous missive bearing the Stanton monogram."

Cora Shaw glared at him, stupefied. The blank sheet dropped from her nerveless fingers. Mr. Pontifex picked it up, ripped it into shreds, pocketed them, and strolled out of the room.

* * * * *

The *Morning Post* of the next day contained the announcement of an engagement between the Earl of Stanton and Lady Lilian Ingram. And on the Countess' breakfast-table lay a laconic communication from Hugo Pontifex. "I have drawn the dragon's teeth—cost of gas, £500."

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SCARFSIDE.

To-day I, Grace Penton, am forty years of age, and I am a thankful woman. Whichever way I look, I see a happy prospect. A strong wall of love shuts me in, so that the cold blasts of what is, I know, a sorrowful world cannot chill my content.

Sitting by the fireside in the oak-pannelled parlour at Scarfside, with my husband's stalwart arm round me, and my two children at my knee, I am, I say it again, a happy and a thankful woman. But, that I may the more enjoy these present things, and be moved to show in the very deed the gratitude I feel, it is in my mind that I should write down some account of the troubles I (and he too) have seen; for things were not always so, and with us it was darkest before the dawn.

My earliest recollection is of a great open space surrounded by lofty buildings dimly seen through the darkness and fog; in the centre of it, a high column and wide pavements. Now I know that it was Trafalgar Square.

It was night, and the wind and rain swept roughly in our faces as we crept along, my father and I; and the plash of the fountains seemed the echo of the storm's cruel play.

I think I was crying; the cold pierced my limbs, for my shabby clothes were almost rags, though he sheltered me as well as he could with the skirt of his coat. I was hungry as well as cold; for I had been sitting, shivering, and waiting since middle-day, in a corner, as near as I dared to a chestnut-seller's fire, while my father called again at a great house in the crowded street hard by, where, so I hoped, he had friends who would help us. I have been taken there, since, and I was able to point out the very house on whose steps my father spent most of his last hours.

They told me that it was a famous club, to which he had once belonged, and he had gone there again in the hope of meeting some fellow-officer who would aid him for the sake of old days.

But it was Christmas-time, and many were out of town, and so none whom we knew passed the doors during those hours of waiting.

Times were changed; the servants were fresh, and did not know him; the house had no longer a welcome. And so late in the evening, he gave up the hope, and came back to me, and took my hand in his, and we plodded wearily through the rain.

By St. Martin's Church he sat down, as if worn out, in a corner against the rails, and drew me to him, and kissed me, and tried to warm me in his arms. I was sobbing with the cold and with hunger; but he, though I had often of late known him cry over me, was soon quite still.

I thought he was asleep, and only moaned softly, lest I should awake him; but when the passing policeman, glancing into our nook, turned his lantern upon the wretched group, he saw that which spoke to his practised eye of no common case of want.

He called another and another, among them a stout man with grey hair and keen eyes under bushy eyebrows; and they drew my father from me, and raised him up, and someone carried me, and said, to quiet me, that I should be taken with him; but how we went I cannot tell.

I suppose they wanted to hide my father's dead face from me. They took me to what I now know was a workhouse; but everyone was kind, and I was warmed and fed; and then I cried to go to my father, for he was all I had.

They took me in to see him—dead; so handsome and stately he looked, as I had never seen him in life.

Some one—the doctor, I think—had pinned upon his breast a bit of crimson ribbon taken from one of the pockets. That was all they found about him, save a letter, written and directed, but not sent, for—ill and starved and broken down—where could he get even the stamp? They fetched a thick red book—an "Army List" I have been told it was—and looked in it, and spoke of my father, and called him Major Folliott. And one—the doctor it was again, I think—stood at the foot of the bed and told a well-known story of the Crimean War, then still fresh in all men's thoughts; and when he had done, and it moved them—maybe the policeman was an old Army man, for he looked very sternly at his helmet—he pointed to the still calm face lying there before us: "That was the man."

I was eleven years old when my cousin, John Penton, transplanted my little white face and shy brown eyes to the farmhouse where my mother had once lived. Gathering from the letter I spoke of above that my father was about to ask him for help—for me, not for himself—the people in London sent to him; and he took charge of me with a readiness which was quickened, though then I did know it, by anger against my father's kinsfolk. The Derbyshire farmer was determined not to be outdone in generosity by the Cheshire squire, who had thought an alliance with his family a crime to be punished in the person of the offender by a lifelong disgrace. And so John Penton took me to Scarfside. How shall I fitly tell of the home that became mine, and which I pray Heaven may be home to me to the end of the chapter?

Try to see a valley as narrow as valley can be, so that at each end there is hardly room for a cart to pass in or out; a valley, too, so steep that the brook, full or low, is always in a hurry to get through it. On one side, like a green wall with a grey rock here and there jutting out, rises the Razor's Edge, the summit of which is as narrow as its name would show.

Scarfside, on the other side of the valley, so near, that as you poise yourself on the top of Razor's Edge, taking care not to fall backwards into Kirtledale, you fancy you could throw a stone over it.

Scarfside—the hill, not the house—is less hard to climb, and has a nice spacious cone on which to rest when you get to the top.

The long, low, grey house, with its stone chimneys and deep-set windows, has a large porch to protect one from the wind, which in winter sweeps by so keenly. The narrow garden running down the brookside, and the orchard with its old stunted fruit trees and its stone-gate pillars—they are far too imposing to be styled posts—fill up all the rest of the tiny glen.

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Over the doorway a coat-of-arms is carved in stone; for Scarfside—now only a farmstead, and a small one—was a gentleman's house when Prince Charlie was over the water, and the Pentons, though but a few acres of barren-hill-side are left, and they have sunk to the level of the farmers around, have as much right to call themselves *armigeri* as the wealthiest baronet in the county.

Something, it may be, of bygone culture has descended to the present owner; and in all outward things, save his courtesy, a rough, Derbyshire Yeoman, John Penton, mixing little with his neighbours, has spent much of his time over books, and tended very carefully the seed sown when he was a boy at Derby School. So he was able to teach me by the cosy kitchen fire many things which a score or less of years ago girls were not wont to be taught. True, of French, German, and music I got none; but of Latin, English, and history I got much; and I well remember John Penton one spring evening taking me to the old London-road two miles away over the hills, and telling me how Prince Charles, the young Pretender, passed that way to Derby in '45. Many and many a time afterwards, when I had given Marjory the slip, I used to go to the same place and sit and dream of the bonnie Prince marching by.

We were an odd group round the deep fireplace in winter. John, in his rough clothes, yellow gaiters, and heavy boots, at the little round table at one side, reading to me Macaulay's history, or hearing me some grammar. Marjory, the kindest of old women, who had nursed my mother, would be on the settle at the other side, her rheumatic back well protected from the draught; and David Boag, my cousin's shadow, as once in a pet I called him, so closely did he always attend his master, would be in the chimney-corner, his legs in the firelight, but his face in the shade, sleeping perhaps, though often his piercing eyes would seem to glint through the shadow as they caught mine, giving me an eerie feeling.

He was such a favourite, however, with my cousin, that I could not but like him. They were all good to me, and those were six pleasant, healthy, quiet years, the first that I spent at Scarfside.

I was always glad to be with John, sometimes learning from him, sometimes teasing him, and I was never so happy as when I could ramble after him when he went about his work. But there came a time when he grew silent; the lessons almost ceased, and he seemed to avoid me, and was often cross with us. He went out earlier and he came home later than of old, and even Boag's attendance seemed to give him no pleasure. I asked Marjory if I had offended him, but she only kissed me and said it was the master's way. It was a way which I think must have been catching; for I too grew shy when we were together, though I was angry with myself, and did not know why; my teasing ways had taken flight, and if he scolded me I felt as if I could cry, though when a child I had laughed at him in his sternest mood. And so when I would be out for a solitary walk, it began to come home to me that I had been living so long upon his kindness, and that it was time I did something for myself.

So one morning, after breakfast, I spoke to him in the parlour, which we always kept for serious business, and told him that I wished to obtain a situation. He asked me, looking gravely through the window as he spoke, if I were tired of Scarfside and its middle-aged people; and, if I had not been so angry with him for saying such a thing, I should have cried bitterly.

As it was, I told him how dear it would always be to me, and that I had not forgotten the cruel streets of London from which he had taken me. Whereupon he said something of thirty-two years and his roughness, to which, as being untrue and having nothing to do with the matter, I said nothing; and he asked me to be his wife.

Then I did cry; but it was with joy, not anger. I was seventeen then, and he was thirty-two, then and now and ever to me all that is strong and brave and good. I was not afraid to tell him yes, for my shyness

Turned his lantern upon the wretched group.

seemed to have fled. I was only proud and glad, for I knew that I loved him well.

And John kissed my tears away, and took me to Marjory, and told her; and so John and I found out our love, and the old wainscotted parlour is dear to us both even now.

* * * * *

I have heard that there are few women so happy as to be loved by two men; it fell out so with me, yet it brought anything but happiness. I don't know when it was that I began to see that David Boag was always at my heels as he used to be at John's, but it was long before my cousin made me happy by a few words in the business parlour.

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I do not think any one else saw David's change of manner, but I did, or thought I did, and it made me ill at ease with him. Therefore, when John told him that we were to be married, I was glad to see him not cast down, but kindly to me; and if he was more noisy than usual, being as a rule a silent man, yet it was brave of

He asked me to be his wife.

him to hide his vexation by a little gaiety, and good-natured of him not to damp our joy.

* * * * *

At times life is like a full stream. Scarcely had I become sure that Scarfside would always be my home, when a fresh event came upon us from that outside world which seemed so small by the side of the little glen that held all I loved. It was the death of my grandfather, old Mr. Folliott.

I have said nothing of his dealings with my father, for I do not wish to write any evil; and indeed I am bound not to do so of him. He was sorry at the last, and would have undone the wrong. That he could not do, for my poor father had been lying seven years in Kirtledale churchyard, whither John Penton had brought him.

But the old man did something. He made a fresh will, which caused so many telegrams and letters to come to us, to say nothing of keen old gentlemen in carriages from Derby, and even further, that many people round who had never heard of Scarfside before must have learnt the way to it; and I suppose that was why neighbours whom we had scarcely seen of late found us out by this time.

Of course I was pleased to find that I should bring something to John, but I was vexed that he should have to go away about my business, as the lawyers would have him do.

This was the first time that John had been away since I grew up, and I felt very wretched without him on the day he went. I was soon myself again, however; the day, though cold, was bright, and I was soon cheery enough, and quite ready to help Marjory in the dairy. We had plenty to do that day and the next; and on the third, just when I felt that Marjory was very cross and David very stupid, a letter came from John saying he should return by the last train that night, but would not reach Scarfside until between one and two in the morning; and he added that we were not to sit up for him. We were all a little excited by his return, so quiet was our life, and I am sure David was as fidgety as I was myself.

Twice that day we were disturbed: first a tramp called. Now, we were always very good to beggars, partly because those who live in quiet places are so, and partly because I sometimes thought of a little waif who crouched in the cold and wet on the steps of St. Martin's Church. But this was a man of undeserving temper, for he was wicked enough to kick Kelpie the sheep-dog—she was very old and weak now, and had crept out to enjoy a little of the winter sunshine on the stones before the porch—and foolish enough to think that no one saw him. Be sure Marjory and I rated him soundly, and gave him nothing, but told him that when David came in from his work he should come after him with the cart-whip. We told David, and for a look from me he would have done it gladly, though the man must have gone some way by that time. But I did not look.

Then, earlier in the day, we had a more unusual visitor; a lady, or one who seemed so—for she was closely veiled, as if against the cold—walked up to the door and asked to see Mr. Penton. We were very curious about her, for she would not rest or take anything; but when she heard that he was from home, walked quickly back by the way she came.

The night was cold and very dark. That made me fearful, and perhaps set us talking of every mischance that could befall John. When bedtime came, after making up a good fire and setting out the master's supper, which I did with my own hands, we yet sat lingering on in the kitchen, and I was nearly selfish enough to ask David to go and meet him. But I had heard David say that he was tired, and I was loth to ask a favour of him, or to seem foolish.

At length, we went up to bed. Until John came home

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there would be no sleep for me and I did not try to get any, but, partly undressed, and wrapping a blanket round me, sat at the window, looking out into the darkness and praying for him. I knew I should hear his wheels the moment he had passed the entrance to the valley, and my ears were on the stretch to catch the first sound.

Then I began to think that he already ought to be here, that he was later than he should be, that something had happened, and I stole downstairs to look at the kitchen clock. But it was not so; and no sooner had I satisfied myself than David, whom I thought asleep, hurried down also, aroused by the little noise I had made.

Hardly had I got back to my post when the rattle of wheels on the hard road gladdened my ears. He was coming—my John was coming; no one else ever drove down the hill at that pace.

Soon I could catch the jingling of the harness in the frosty air; nearer and nearer they were coming, hardly slackening at all, and I could hear the horse's footfall as well coming swiftly down the well-known road. How dark it was, I was trying, but peer as I would, I could not make out his figure as he drove into the orchard, when—Ah—a loud crash that sounded dully through the stillness, a rattling fall in which splintering wood and kicking heels seemed mingled; the oncoming wheels stopped, everything stopped, silence, silence.

I was in the act of fastening my dress but after one choking sob, while my heart stood still, I fled down the stairs, and with trembling hands unlocked the door before Marjory and David, who had both been awakened by my cries, could help.

How quickly I sped across the garden and through the orchard to the gateway.

Thank Heaven, John himself, and unhurt clasps me in his arms, and kisses me with shaking lips.

I cared for nothing more.

They brought lights soon, and a gun to put the poor horse out of his pain; he was beyond help. Then the master and all of us came into the kitchen, and there was that in his face I had never seen before. We listened, and I clung to him as he spoke.

It was no accident. Someone had placed a ladder taken from the ricks across the gate-pillars (there never was a gate there in our time), and leaning against them so that it must throw down the horse, looking for no obstacle.

Steep as the road was he must have meant murder. The shafts were snapped like matches, and the dog-cart thrown on to the poor horse's back; but by what we call chance his driver was flung sideways on to the turf, and escaped with a shaking.

We gazed into one another's faces, and found the whiteness of our own reflected there.

Who had done this cruel, this dastardly thing, and why? Had John laid his hand upon him at that moment small mercy would have been his; and even Marjory would have made him tremble, the old woman's anger was so deep. For me, John was safe!

The peaceful life that we had led at Scarfside seemed to have come to an end. In truth, we had now much to think of and much to do; and the attempt upon my cousin's life—base as it was, having, so far as we knew, no link with the future—filled less and less of our thoughts. I, indeed, was afraid to let my mind run upon it, my anger grew so hot within me.

It was all put down to the tramp; and if suspicion fell elsewhere, we did not hear of it. They scoured the countryside for him as far as Derby; but he must have made haste to put the miles between himself and us, for they did not come up with him. We were all mistaken as you will see.

When our excitement had somewhat died away, John had great news for us. My grandfather had left all he had to leave to me; and though the acres that once stretched on every side of the still stately old mansion were sadly diminished by long bygone extravagances, enough remained to give a fair rent-roll, and the lawyers held out hopes that, by prudence, the waning fortunes of the house might in time be augmented.

John had to tell us that I was quite a rich young lady.

I stole downstairs to look at the kitchen clock.

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There was a woman with him; tall and young and handsome.

We could hardly believe it. Even now I was to have an allowance that to us seemed wonderful; and as he told us of all these things, I am not ashamed to avow that my heart beat faster—but it was for his sake. How old Marjory cried with delight as she called me an heiress, and stroked my locks as if they had turned to real gold! David's fingers worked faster than ever with pleasure; and only John seemed almost sad as he painted my possessions in the richest colours. Perhaps it was because the lawyers thought fit that I should live at Folliott Park for a short time before our marriage. They had arranged that I should go there in a month or so, when some nice old lady had been found to take care of me, until my cousin should have the best of all rights to do so. Such matters gave us a great deal to do. Still, I had time to notice that John, whose every look I knew so well, was troubled by a letter which came to him about this time. He did not show it to me as was his way. I would not vex him with questions; but I was sure that day he was fidgeting about something, and he made so little of me, that I was very low when bedtime came. It was very foolish to be troubled by John's abstraction; but I was. And it seemed as if David saw it and wished me not to think of it; for in the afternoon of the next day he came and told me that the otter was in the little pool just below the orchard.

A week before, one took up his abode thereabouts; and as I had never seen an otter, John and he had promised to fetch me, when there was any chance of catching sight of it out of its holt.

I was not at that moment in spirits to enjoy the chance to the full; but David had so set his heart upon my going, and was so eager that I should not miss it, that I did not like to disappoint him after he had taken the trouble to fetch me. I ran out with him without my hat through the garden, and down to the brook; and we had just reached the end of the orchard above the pool, when we saw John—or rather I did; for David was intent upon the otter.

John was not alone—how quickly I saw that. And as I looked, the dull feeling of trouble that had been hanging over me for a day or two, caused by his coldness, or perhaps only a shadow of what was coming, took solid shape. There was a woman with him: tall and young and handsome. The one, in all certainty, who called upon us while he was away.

But now her veil was back and she was gazing into his face, and he was holding both her hands tightly and leaning over her as he talked slowly and earnestly, just as he and I had often talked. Oh, John, John! I had seen enough for my pride. They were in the road just at the entrance of the valley, out of earshot from the orchard, and where no one could see them from the house. I had no eyes for the otter now; only for him and her. As well as I could I made some excuse.

Happily, David was too eager in his quest to notice them, and I made him come back with me to the house. Then I crept up to my room and cried so bitterly. You see, I had believed in John, and pinned my girlish faith on him; and I feared that my idol was of clay. Who was this woman whom he had met outside the house and whose hands he clasped as I had known him clasp mine, and in whose face he gazed so earnestly?

I was sure she was handsome; and I had seen her eyes sparkle from where I stood. But I was too proud to tell him I had seen them. He should not think he was watched.

When we met at tea, however, my manner was not as usual; and he soon felt that there was something wrong between us. Oddly too, this evening John was more like his old self; he had got rid of his thoughtfulness, and rallied me quite merrily on my sweet bow of ribbon.

Then he asked me soberly if I were well; and though I did not seem to be looking at him, I knew that he was puzzled and anxious. From this his face changed to gravity, which, as the evening wore on, took more and more a look of pain and thought.

I would have given the world to have taken his dear head on my shoulder, and kissed away the cares from his brow, and the aching from his eyes; but that woman was between us, and the wound was too fresh.

Those were four wretched weeks that followed my unlucky visit to the otter's pool. John gave me no explanation, nor did he hint at his secret meeting; but his manner grew colder and colder, and his voice more hard when he spoke to me, so that even David saw that something was amiss, and, in his good-natured way, I suppose, thought that by being more gay himself he might conceal, if he could not mend, the breach between us.

David's merriment, well meant though it might be, jarred upon us. As for Marjory, I knew not why, she was sometimes vexed with me; and then again, I would catch her looking at me in a pitying way, that told she guessed what was the matter. But she said nothing. Dear Marjory, I have learnt how ill she was thinking of her bairn, and how love was struggling with anger in her honest breast.

So the breach grew wider day by day; and by the end of the month, without a word said, John and I had tacitly made up our minds that all was over between us.

On the evening before I was to leave for Chester—that part of the plan was still adhered to—we did have something in the shape of an explanation. He asked me to

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go for a walk with him; and we climbed Scarfside together, as we had so often done before. It was a silent walk.

We both wished to say something; and it did not get itself said, until we were at the orchard gate on the way home again. Then he did speak, in his brave way, very shortly, and how much to the point I hardly felt, until I got to my room, and hid my face on the dear little bed that had known all my childish joys and sorrows.

Circumstances (it was unlike him to be lenient to himself, I thought), he said, had come between us; and we must not blame one another in the time to come.

However, we were more cheerful that last evening; it may be because we had, to some extent, found out our footing, and there was no fear of our warmth being mistaken.

Our talk was chiefly of my journey next day. I was not sorry when John was called away on some outdoor business upon the farm, which would detain him until after our bed-time, and I was able to go to my room under pretence of finishing my packing, but really to sit down and think sadly to myself that this was my last night in the old home which had taken me in when I was homeless and friendless. In the old days how good cousin John had been to me, how generously he had sheltered me when I was a helpless child in whom he could see only something to pity. Afterwards he had seen something to love; he had loved me once—I clung to that; and then—a bitter then it was that followed.

But thinking of these things, a resolve grew strong within me that, before I left, I would tell him I freely wished him happiness, and that, forgetting the later past, I should ever be grateful for the kindness of my childish days. His last thought of me should not be that I went away full of resentment.

The household had all gone to bed. It was close upon midnight, and still he had not come in, for I should have heard him come up the stairs. What time could be better than the present, late as it was? I should sleep more contentedly, if not more happily, when I had got rid of some of this weight of gratitude. A month ago, and I should have thought him little satisfied with gratitude alone.

The last time that I had waited thus—and yet not thus, alas!—for him had been on the evening of his accident, if it might be called so, at the orchard gate. The stillness of the house and the hour made me think of it with an uneasy shudder; but now there could be no danger—he had only gone to an outlying shed to see one of the cattle which was ill; David Boag should have done it, but he was unwell and had gone early to bed.

At first I was only impatient for John to come in that I might see him, and say what I meant to say; but as the time wore on, and got later, and the house more and more still, and yet he did not come, I grew uneasy about him. Not for long; he must have let himself in very quietly, for, though I did not hear the door opened, he is moving softly in the kitchen underneath. Without taking a light I go quietly down the stairs, cross the little hall, and pause an instant in the darkness at the half-open door, fearful at the last lest John may think it unmaidenly of me.

The door between the hall and kitchen is half open, and with my hand already stretched out to push it farther I am stopped by what I see within. Surely this is not the familiar room where the kettle has so often sung, and the long oaken table mirrored our laughing faces. John is not there, but someone is—someone—a dark, dark form crouching on the hearth in the full blaze of the fire, and at the sight of his waiting figure and the thing in his hands, my heart stands still, as it did once before at my bedroom window. That ill-omened watcher so patiently waiting, weapon in hand, means danger to someone—to John.

The hearth is on my left hand as I look in through the door, which faces the outer one leading from the kitchen into the open air. There is no light in the room save that of the wood fire, which is burning brightly, filling the room with lights and shadows; and though I cannot see the man's face, which is turned away, watching the outer door opposite me and beyond him, the door by which John may come in at any moment, yet what he holds so tenderly is plain enough. It is John's gun. He is waiting there, in the quiet kitchen, with only the loud ticking of the clock to keep pace with my heart, to murder him when he comes in through that door.

What am I to do? If I leave my post for an instant, before I can get to one of the windows upstairs to warn him, John may come in, and it will be too late. What!

That ill-omened watcher, weapon in hand, means danger to someone—to John.

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Of all others, the man is David Boag the bailiff! He has turned his head, as if he heard the beating of my heart, and it is he indeed.

It is his, David's face, and yet it is not.

The features are distorted with fiendish glee; the eyes are glittering with the glitter of madness, and the teeth, from which the lips are drawn back, are clenched in the fixity of his purpose. He is watching that door with the tenacity of a dog, never winking.

Even as he turns his head to listen his eyes do not quit the door before him, and he clutches the gun with hands that are firm with the strength of madness. Mad he is, and in a madman's most dangerous mood. A new thought breaks in upon my mind.

As I think of a hundred little things, I wonder I have never suspected this before. How shall I save John?

So gravely and tenderly he told it me.

Of myself I did not think, thank Heaven, as I leant against the wall, hardly four yards from this armed maniac, but only how I might save my lover.

For the moment he was my lover again, and the last weeks of estrangement were forgotten. Not a sound in the house but the clock ticking on, and the hushed fall of the wood ashes.

Marjory and the servant were fast asleep at the end of a long passage upstairs, little thinking of the scene that the firelight was shining upon.

I dared not stir; John might open that door at any moment, and I felt no hope that that dark vengeful form, crouching in that shadowy room, would miss his aim, though the fire flickered, and sometimes to my fancy seemed to multiply him, and fill all the room with lurking figures, ready to pounce upon me. No plan occurred to me; and even as I thought, the key turned slowly and gratingly in the lock of the outer door, at which I gazed desperately.

It shook; John's fingers were on the latch lifting it; and with every nerve strained, with a face like a stone, the madman was bringing the gun to his shoulder. This was no time for thought now.

As quick as thought itself, and almost as still, I glided in behind him into the room, and as he raised the weapon, and the door was opened widely, I sprang forward and flung my arms round the madman, striking up the gun.

Even so it was Heaven's mercy, not I, that saved my lover. Had he not lingered a moment to scrape his boots I had been too late; as it was the charge struck the wall just above the door. As David dashed me, screaming loudly now, on the floor, John, who seemed to take it all in in an instant, had his hands upon him and tried to throw him.

It was a grim struggle by the flickering blaze of the fire, while I lay only able to scream; not that David in his saner moments was any match for his master in strength, but to-night the force of madness was in him. Again and again he tried to dash John against the fireplace or the table, and seemed getting the better of him, while the half-uttered cries that forced themselves from his writhing foaming lips told of the fierce hate that nerved his mad fingers in their clutches at his master's throat.

And I could do nothing, or only scream. But fortunately my cries and the gun-shot brought down Marjory; and the stout old woman gave such aid, that soon the poor wretch was lying fast and bound on the floor.

Then they turned to me with such pitying words. It had not hurt me as I fell, but somehow my arm was broken. I would have had it broken a dozen times to save John's life.

Then they lifted me up and I fainted away.

* * * * *

The doctor had gone and left me quite comfortable; Marjory was sitting by the fire making up for the loss of her night's rest, and I could hear John moving downstairs.

It was just the time in the afternoon when a farmhouse is always so still, and as I watched Marjory's cap nodding, my thoughts, which had been nervously dwelling on the details of the past night, conjuring up poor David's distorted face, or the ill-omened figure crouching in the gloom of the fire-lit kitchen, began to turn to myself. I had saved my cousin's life—my cousin's; he could be nothing more to me, the night had altered that. I struggled to make my thankfulness for his safety pure from all regret that the life so saved was to be given to another. Still, I could now more easily say the words I had been on my way to say to him last night, and they would be more needed, for he could not but be sorry that his love had gone from me.

So I was thinking when John came upstairs, and told me what the doctor said of the "little girl's" courage; so gravely and tenderly he told it me, almost wistfully I thought. Perhaps he was thinking of what might have been. Then he went on to speak of poor David Boag, and I listened, getting more and more interested.

Twenty years ago John's grandfather, the owner of Scarfside Farm, had been hard pressed for money. Scarfside was fast slipping from the hands of the old family, when a friend, himself not too well off, a man who had long lived side by side with him, came to his aid, and the land was saved.

Old Penton did not forget the debt, nor did he think it fulfilled when the money was repaid. Hugh Boag died before his friend, and when he was near his end, he sent for him in great distress, and confided to him his two infant grandchildren and the little he had to

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leave them. Penton held it as a sacred trust, and as such, handed it on to his grandson with the old place.

But the trust was a heavy one: there was the taint of madness on the mother's side, which, in the case of the elder child, a girl, soon showed itself; and no sooner had she grown up than it was found necessary to confine her where she could be taken good care of.

"I never felt much fear for David," John went on, "though I knew that he was not quite like other men. He was so good a man of business, and so thoroughly acquainted with his work, that I came to feel secure. Here there was little to excite him, and I had always been careful to keep him from all idea of the curse hanging over him, and to separate him from his sister, so that he was not even aware of her existence. Poor David! I fear he was the man who put the ladder against the orchard-gate; still, that is better than to think any sane man did it. Something of late must have excited him. I blame myself, Grace, that I did not notice the change in him some time ago, but I have been thinking of you—of your affairs—and have been troubled too about his sister. She escaped about a month ago from the people who take care of her, and found her way here. I did not speak of it because I thought it might alarm you; and, besides, we could hardly then have kept it from David. She hung about the place, and once wrote to me (there were times when she was fairly sane, and this was one), and made an appointment with me here. Luckily I contrived to meet her on the road, so that she did not come to the house. Poor thing! she is fierce and violent at times when the fit is upon her; but she was gentle enough then, and I persuaded her to go quietly with the people who were waiting close by with the carriage; they are very kind to her, I know, but I fear they will not undertake her brother. It was that and other things that made me less watchful of David."

John paused, but my head was buried in the pillow. Though my arm was bandaged up, the doctor had mercifully left me the power of turning on one side. How else should I have hid my burning face? There was not an inch of my skin that was not tingling with shame. How could I have doubted him, have wronged him, when he was trying only to save me from annoyance? How bad I must be to have built up this pile of jealousy, which had had no foundation, not even a weak one!

I could pretty well guess the cause of poor David's excitement, but I did not tell John then, though I have since.

Probably David, whether in malice or in mischief it would be hard to say, had deliberately led me to the otter's pool, that I might see John meeting the stranger, though his cunning taught him to hide his purpose even when it was accomplished.

A wild jealousy of John, only, I hope, in part on my account, had led him to plot against his master's life and love. How much of madness was in this from the beginning we can never be sure.

But while I was so ashamed of myself, I was also trembling with joy—doubting, hesitating joy—yet ready to start into glorious certainty at a word from John; for if this were not the cause of his coldness, what was? Was it merely the answer of his pride to my own manner? No matter, I could forgive him anything now that the nightmare that had brooded over my love was dispelled.

And so I hid my face in my pillow, and feeling as if my very hair were reddening, told John what I had been thinking these dreary weeks, and how I had blamed him in my jealous folly, and at last how I had been coming down last night, sadly but bravely, to wish him happiness. And then I asked him to forgive me: but he was so long in answering that in sudden dread I looked up to meet such an astonished face that I laughed through my blushes. I was very angry next moment, when he told me he had put down the change in my manner to my change in fortune; he had been thinking that of me on those long evenings when he was looking so sadly at the fire, and my love had almost melted my pride, I so longed to comfort him.

He and Marjory had thought this of me—that the girl whom they had sheltered when she was penniless and friendless would despise them when wealth had fallen to her. If I could have sat up I would have boxed his ears. I could do it now when I think of it. Oh, it was too bad. But as I could only cry a little (my smiles and tears were very near the surface that happy day), John had me in his power, and kissed me until I forgave him.

We resolved that nothing should ever make us distrust each other again; and now that nothing ever can. I thanked my broken arm a hundred times, but for which I might have missed my happiness; every pang it gave me told me that my lover was my very own.

When Marjory roused herself she found the fire almost out, and we remembered with a guilty start that the dear old lady with whom by this time I should have been far on the way to Chester, had passed the whole afternoon in the oak parlour. But though she was a grand personage, Mrs. Harcourt took to me at once. John was so polite to her; and I verily believe that she was delighted to stay quietly with us instead of undertaking my enthronement at Folliott Park. When we came to know her well she told me with a merry laugh that for all her dignified gravity she was frightened at her task, before she knew with whom she had to deal.

* * * * *

Yes, to-day, I, Grace Penton, am forty years old, and I am sitting in the dear old parlour where my husband first told me of his love; it seems but a month ago, so peaceful and happy have been the years that divide us from it. It is not often we can steal away here and be quiet. John is a great man in Cheshire, and but that he is one of the county members, he would have been High Sheriff this year. There, and in London most of our time has to be spent. Mrs. Harcourt and Marjory keep house at Scarfside, and sometimes, to their great pleasure we send the children to the old home when we cannot go ourselves.

On my right arm there is a small, hard lump where the bone was broken twelve years ago. I tell John often what a disfigurement it is when I am obliged to wear short sleeves, and if I had my way, I say, I should hide it with a bracelet. But he will not have it so; and, in secret, neither would I.

He says he is more proud of that little bruise than of the comeliness that makes men call me a belle at forty. We are rich and honoured and sought after, but I ever keep in memory the ragged child who crouched from the wind and rain in her dead father's arms in that dark corner by St. Martin's Church; and at times when the nights are coldest and darkest John takes me there—no matter for what. Surely it is debt I pay.

J. S.

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SHORT STORIES THAT MAKE YOU LAUGH.

We devote every week space in *Short Stories* to pithy, humorous anecdotes similar to those which appear in these columns. A prize of £1 1s. will be sent to the reader who submits the best storyette this week, and a Stereoscope to each of those whose attempts are used. The anecdotes may be either original or selected; in the latter case, the source MUST be stated. Attempts must reach the Storyette Editor, *Short Stories* Office, Henrietta Street, Strand, London, W.C., by Monday, April 29th. Post-cards only, please. The prize of One Guinea has been awarded this week to Mr. A. Kitchen, of 9 Chariot Street, Leeds, whose contribution is denoted by a star thus.*

KNICKER: "You say your son is a contractor. What is his special line?"

Becker: "Debts."

JIMMY: "I say, ma, gimme a cake."

Mother (who is trying to teach him to be polite): "If you what, Jimmy?"

Jimmy: "Well, ma, if you've got any."

DOMESTIC: "Oh, please, mum, what shall I do? Half the soup is spilt, and the boarders is at the table."

Mrs. Slimdiet (firmly): "Empty the box of red pepper into what's left. There will be enough then."

VISITOR: "What! Haven't you named the baby yet?"

Mamma: "No."

Visitor: "Can't find anything good enough?"

Mamma: "N-no; can't find out which uncle is the richest."

NURSE GIRL: "I lost track of the child, mum, and——"

"Gracious goodness! Why didn't you speak to a policeman?"

Nurse Girl: "I was speaking to wan all the toime, mum."

"So you quarrelled with George?" said one young woman.

"Yes," answered the other with much pathos.

"Is your engagement broken off?"

"Oh, no. I told him I never wanted to see his face again, and he said he would leave me for ever. But we didn't go so far as to break off our engagement."

"YOU used to say you thought Heaven sent me to you," she said tearfully, after a little family jar.

"I see no reason to change my mind about that now," he returned.

"Really!" she exclaimed delightedly.

"Certainly," he replied.

Then he spoilt it all by adding:

"As a punishment."

"THIS is about the time of the year," said Mrs. Watts to her neighbour, "that the fishing fever strikes my husband. If he can get out on the banks of some creek and catch two or three little mud-cats in the course of an afternoon he is perfectly happy."

"Indeed? So he is fond of fishing, then?"

"Fond of fishing? Why, that man is a perfect anglomaniac."

"OUR baby seems to have a natural taste for the piano."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; he's sucked half the polish off one leg."

SOCIETY BEAUTY: "I declare, I was upon thorns the whole time."

The Hon. Toffleigh Smart: "And you were in your proper place, my dear."

Society Beauty: "What do you mean?"

The Hon. Toffleigh Smart: "Why, surely the proper place for a rose like yourself is upon a thorn."

"COULD you do somethin' fer a pore ole sailor?" asked the wanderer at the gate.

"Pore ole sailor?" echoed the lady at the tub.

"Yes'm. I follered the wotter fer twenty years."

"Well," said the lady at the tub, after a critical look, "you certainly don't look as if you ever ketched up with it."

MR. NEWLYWED (struggling to carve the first turkey his wife ever cooked): "I say, Mary, the bones in this bird are as brittle as flints. Just hear the knife grit."

Mrs. Newlywed (almost crying with anger): "You must be against the shells, John!"

"Shells?"

"Yes, John. Don't you remember that you asked me to stuff the turkey with oysters?"

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*A CERTAIN Leeds firm a short time ago gave away as a bonus a pound packet of their celebrated tea on a purchase of 10s. One Saturday evening one of their assistants was suddenly taken ill, and was removed home in a cab. On inquiring the reason of this sudden collapse, it was stated that a lady walked into the shop and asked for 10s. of stamps. It took all there was in the store, but the assistant wished to please the lady. She took the stamps and handed over the 10s., thanked him, and waited.

"Is there something else, madam?" queried the assistant.

"Oh! no," replied the lady. "There is nothing I wish to buy."

And still she waited.

"You gave me the correct amount for the stamps, did you not, madam?" asked the assistant.

"Yes," replied the lady.

"Are you sure there is nothing else you are wanting?"

"Well, I noticed you were giving a pound of tea on a purchase of 10s., and I am waiting for my tea."

The assistant is slowly recovering.

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I've an utter contempt for riches, mind;
For banknotes, and bonds, and deeds,
But, alas! my contempt is not the kind
Familiarity breeds.

Lady: "Most of your trouble, I suppose, is due to drink?"

Tramp: "Well, yes, lady; it is a good deal of trouble to get a drink sometimes."

Badger (angry and excited): "I say, your dog bit one of my boys last night. What are you going to do about it?"

M'Gall: "Well, if it doesn't make the dog ill, I won't do anything about it."

One day the children were having an object lesson on the heron. The master called attention to its small tail, saying, "The bird has no tail to speak of."

The next day he asked the scholars to write a description of the bird, and one youngster wound up by saying: "The heron has a tail, but it must not be talked about."

"Your eyes are like diamonds," he said, and she smiled.
As a thought on her suddenly dawned.
For she knew that he might be in hard straits some day;
She replied, "But they cannot be pawned!"

Fair Visitor: "So you have really decided not to sell your house?"

Fair Hostess: "Yes. You see, we placed the matter in the hands of a real estate agent. After reading his lovely advertisement of our property, neither John nor myself could think of parting with such a wonderful and perfect home."

Recently a newspaper man received a railway free pass, and wrote to the superintendent asking him if he could not embrace his wife also on the trip. The superintendent replied that he thought perhaps he could, but did not want to say positively until he had seen the wife, as he was a little fastidious in his tastes.

A friend called at a young would-be artist's studio a few days ago and found the budding R.A. putting the finishing touches to a picture.

"Well, what do you think of it?" asked the artist, stepping backward to get a good view of his work.

His friend stared at the picture in astonishment, for it depicted a man falling headfirst from an immensely high cliff, at the bottom of which a mass of jagged rocks awaited him. But the falling man's face wore an expression of rapturous enjoyment!

"Suicide or lunatic?" queried the artist visitor.

"Neither. Realism, my boy, simply realism!" cried the budding Millais enthusiastically. "You see," he explained, "I read in Pearson's Weekly a week or two ago that a person, while falling from a great height, hears beautiful music, suffers no pain, terror, or despair, and altogether experiences most agreeable sensations. We must be realistic these days, my boy."

New Boarder: "Can I get my meals on time?"
Landlady: "No, you will have to pay in advance."

A devoted wife calls her husband "My Uncrowned King."

Bald-headed probably.

"Well," said the good-natured man, as he sat in the restaurant, "that is a most accommodating waiter. He probably thinks I am not hungry, and is waiting for me to get an appetite."

"I can tell your fortune and find out your future husband for you, lady," said a gipsy.

"If you find him out as often as I find my present husband out," replied the lady, "I shall never marry again."

Jackson: "I've been married for fifteen years, and my wife never fails to meet me at the door."

Johnson: "Wonderful!"

Jackson: "Yes, she's afraid I might go in without wiping my boots."

Magistrate: "The assault you have committed on your poor wife is a most brutal one. Do you know of any reason why I should not send you to prison?"

Prisoner: "If you do, yer worship, it will spoil our honeymoon."

He (who has just been rejected): "You don't dare to say 'No' again."

She: "Why not?"

He: "Because two negatives make an affirmative."

She: "Not with a woman."

He: "How many does it take with a woman?"

She: "One."

An old whitewasher stood before the court as a witness.

The lawyer for the defendant tried to confuse him. "You are James Miller?"

"Yes."

"Are you the James Miller who was sentenced under mitigating circumstances for robbery?"

"No."

"You are, perhaps, the Miller who was sentenced to two years' imprisonment for theft, then?"

"I am not that Miller either."

"Were you ever in prison?"

"Yes, twice."

"How long the first time?"

"One afternoon."

"One afternoon! And the second time? You must make a truthful statement, for you are a sworn witness. If you were in prison for so short a time, what did you do?"

"I whitewashed a cell for a lawyer who had cheated his clients."

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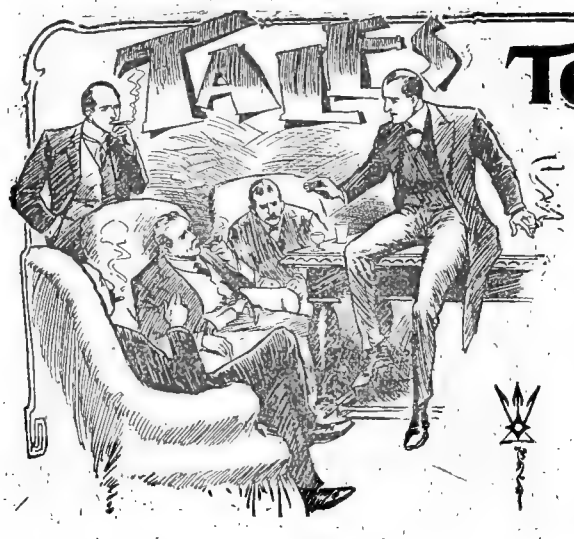

Told off Duty.

[You probably don't know the "Stand-Easy" Club. It isn't in the directory, and you might live next door to the place for years without knowing of its existence by that name. It isn't a conventional club; there is no subscription, and there is no register of members. It is merely a room in a quiet, orderly, and select hostelry in Westminster, where, by common consent, a number of officials of all kinds meet when "off duty." There you may find detectives from Scotland Yard, near by; firemen, commissionaires, a soldier or two, and maybe a doctor from St. Thomas' Hospital or elsewhere. A motley crowd they would be if they wore their uniforms, but at the "Stand-Easy" uniforms are a rarity, "mufti" being the unwritten rule. The result is a gathering of quiet, well-behaved, and well-dressed men. Saturday night is the time when one sees the biggest muster, for then it is the custom for one member to regale the company with a story, the story being, as a rule, an account of some incident in the teller's own career.]

A Fight to the Death.

THE FENCING MASTER'S STORY.

If a man is lucky enough to make a bit of a name for himself in any particular line during his career in the Army, he generally finds that he can turn his experience to very good account when he has bidden good-bye to the service.

A riding-master, if he has contrived to put by a little nest-egg, as many of them do, will open a riding school and probably do well at it. His old officers stand by him, you see, send their own sons to him and get other people to do the same, so that he goes into the business with a nice little following at his heels.

In my own particular case, I had made a reputation with the sword, which stood by me well in after days. I was champion of the regiment up to the day I left it. And, though I say it myself, there were few going in those days who could hold their own against me either with the broadsword or foils. I could show you at home a sideboard covered with silver cups, medals, and other trophies, all of which I scooped in at different tournaments and assaults-at-arms.

When I got my discharge, then, the first thing I did was to start a School of Arms on my own account, or rather I took over a shaky concern, which was pretty well on its last legs, and tried to put new life into it. And though there have been ups and downs in the business, as in most others, on the whole I have no great cause to grumble.

The outside public know very little of these establishments, although there are several of them sprinkled over London. They are frequented mostly by men of a certain class—celebrities, many of them—who seem to have inherited the love of sword-play from their ancestors of the good old fighting days. Actors, too, turn up there to learn tricks of fence, which they can show off behind the footlights, and of course, we have a fair number of military men.

Sometimes, but not often, a stranger may drop in. As a general rule when you put a weapon into their hands they are quite out of their element, but once in a way you may drop across a man who knows just as much about it as you do yourself—and, perhaps, a bit more into the bargain. As, for instance, in the case of the singular person who was known to us as The Count.

Whether he was a real live Count or not, I'm sure I can't say, nor even now have I the least idea as to his name. But we got into the habit of alluding to him by this title at my place, for he was a man of the most polished and distinguished manners—a gentleman down to his finger-tips.

When he first turned up at the School of Arms I gave him a turn with the foils myself. It didn't take many seconds, after we had crossed blades, to assure me that I was face to face with a man who could give me points even in my palmiest days. He had a wrist of steel, a quick, sure eye, and was a perfect master of fence into the bargain.

I tried him with the broadsword—my favourite weapon—and I don't mind admitting that he fairly knocked spots off me. Then, out of sheer curiosity, I placed a revolver in his hands.

The Count took it with a smile. Sticking up a card against the wall—the five of clubs—he stepped back twelve paces and commenced to fire. When he had finished, there were five round holes where the clubs had been!

After that he came in regularly almost every morning, and practised with each weapon in turn. When he was shooting I often stood by and watched him with the most curious sensation of awe and wonder. He set about it with such deadly earnestness one would almost have supposed that a mortal enemy of his stood before him in place of the target. I couldn't help thinking that there was some deep motive underlying all this, that he was keeping his hand in for some definite and special purpose, known only to himself.

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And that purpose, by a singular chance, I was soon destined to learn.

Not long afterwards the Count disappeared from the School of Arms as suddenly as he had turned up there. I missed him very much at first, especially as his fame had got round and numbers used to drop in to see him fence. He was a splendid advertisement for me; one of the best "draws" I ever had.

As business was rather slack just then I made up my mind to run across to Paris in order to witness the grand assault-at-arms which was to take place there, and in which some of the most famous French and Italian fencing-masters were to compete. It was, in fact, a trial of skill between the two countries, a test as to which particular style could be called the better; to me a sight well worth seeing.

On the French side the man who held the leading place was a certain Captain Movart. He had been a noted duellist in his day—and still was, for that matter, provided he could get anyone to fight with him. His deadly reputation, however, caused people to give him a wide berth. Unless he could purposely provoke a quarrel, which, it is said, he sometimes did in order to keep his hand in, few men could be found to face him.

His career in the army had been a notorious one. It was commonly reported that he could boast of eleven victims, most of them young officers whom his bitter taunts had forced into fight. I believe he was heard to say that when he had brought his total up to a round dozen he would throw up duelling altogether; but so far no one cared to oblige him by becoming number twelve.

Yet, bully and blackleg as he was, there was no denying that he was unsurpassed with the rapier, which was the weapon he loved most. His play was superb. I saw him myself on this occasion defeat one of Italy's most famous champions, and it was a sight I am not likely to forget.

There was a café close by which was much frequented by the fencers and others who were devoted to the art. Movart was generally to be found there of an evening. He always sat apart, at a little special table of his own. No one ever dared to take possesion of that table, even when he was not present. By common consent it was always reserved for him.

One evening I happened to stroll into the café close behind the captain himself. As he crossed the threshold I saw him pull up with a start, and glare around him as if he could scarcely believe his eyes.

I knew at the first glance that there was something in the wind. The waiter was quaking in his shoes, and all those present had an eager, expectant sort of look, as if they knew there was likely to be a breeze.

I glanced across towards that sacred table; and there, calmly reading a newspaper, the only perfectly self-possessed man in the room, sat my friend, the Count!

For the first second or so Movart seemed to be thunderstruck at the audacity of this stranger. Then, with a fierce scowl upon his face, he strode across the room.

"Do you know, sir," he blurted out, "that you are occupying my table?"

"Indeed!" returned the Count, looking up at him in the coolest manner possible, and without offering to stir. "I was not aware that you were proprietor of this café."

It was a neat thrust, and it struck home.

Movart's face grew black as a thundercloud, and in a quiver of rage he thrust out his hand as if to seize the other by the collar.

But the Count was too quick for him. In an instant he was upon his feet, and the next second I saw the Captain go staggering back, and fall with a crash to the floor.

My word, what a hubbub and a scene there was! Every man in the place sprang to his feet as if electrified. As for me, thinking the Count might be glad of someone to stand by him if there was to be a shindy, I hurried forward and took my place at his side. He seemed to divine my intention, and shot a grateful glance at me.

To describe Movart's look at that moment would be

I saw the Captain go staggering back and fall with a crash to the floor.

entirely beyond me. His eyes rolled in his head; every muscle of his face was twitching and working in a horrible manner. He clutched at his throat as if actually choking with rage, while his breath came in quick, hard pants.

It was some little time before he could control himself sufficiently to speak; and then he rose and advanced slowly towards his opponent.

"You shall pay for that blow with your life!" he hissed out.

The Count bowed.

"I am ready to afford you satisfaction at any moment," he said.

"With the rapier?" asked the captain, quickly.

"With any weapon you like."

"Good! My seconds shall call upon you forthwith. That is," he added with an ugly sneer, "if they know where you are to be found."

The Count took a card from his pocket and laid it quietly on the table.

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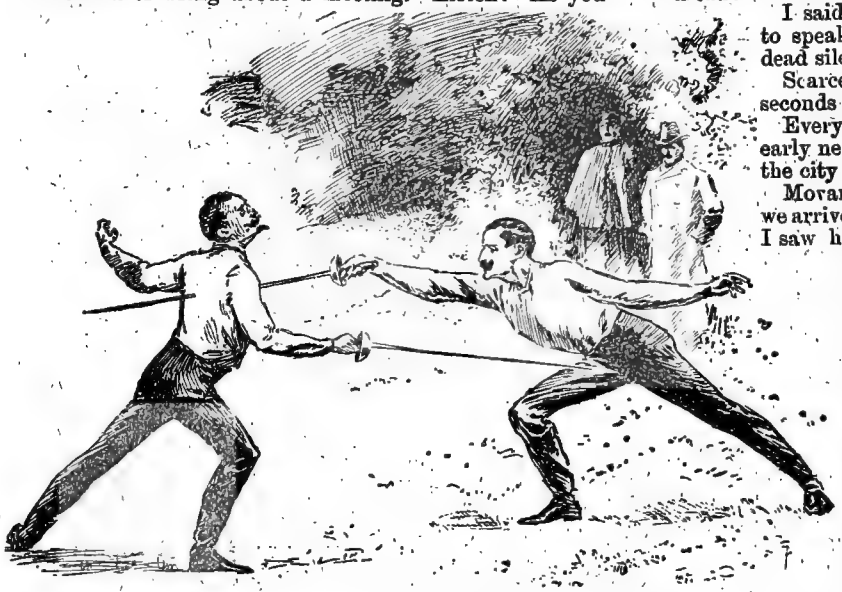
"They will find me at that address," he answered, "I have no doubt that this gentleman," he went on, turning to me, "will act on my behalf. He is one in whose hands I can safely place myself. Your seconds will find him at my rooms."

Movart picked up the card, turned on his heel, and strode out of the place. The Count ran his arm through mine, and we passed out through the gaping crowd.

"I must beg you to pardon this abrupt demand upon your services," he said, in his courteous way, when we got outside. "I can only plead in excuse that there are circumstances which make me very reluctant to apply to anyone here."

"If I am not mistaken, you have a score to wipe off with that man," I ventured to hint.

"I have," he returned, in his hardest tones. "The scene just now, as you may have guessed, was solely intended to bring about a meeting. Listen! As you are good enough to act for me in this affair it is only right that you should be made acquainted with the cause of the quarrel.



The counter-thrust was so swift that I hardly saw it reach its mark.

"Years ago, when I served in the army, I was stationed at a small town in the South of France. There I made the acquaintance of a beautiful girl, whose heart I won. And it was a heart of gold! We loved each other fondly, passionately. There was not a cloud to cast a shadow over our happiness.

"This Movart came; joined the regiment in which I was serving. He had an old grudge against me, and from the very first he set himself to thwart, to ruin me.

"He soon struck, in his venomous, serpent-like fashion. He accused me—Ah! *Mon Dieu*—he accused me of holding treasonable correspondence with a foreign power. You know what that means in France; you have had an instance of it lately in the case of the unfortunate Dreyfus.

"I was arrested, brought to trial; and, though I was acquitted, the stigma still rested upon my name. I found myself shunned, slighted on every hand.

"I sought out Louise—that was her name—who alone remained true to me. Her parents closed their doors against me. Movart had been there, poisoning their minds. The black-hearted villain even attempted to make love to the girl himself, though she turned from him with loathing, with detestation.

"I challenged him, of course. He declined to fight. His refusal, couched in the most offensive terms, was more cutting than any blow he could have dealt me with his sword. One word that letter contained will make his attitude clear to you; it was 'Traitor'!

"I left the army and went abroad. But I had no intention of allowing that heartless wretch to escape me. I have trained myself in the use of every weapon. You have seen me practise at your place in London. You now know for what purpose I came there."

"And Mademoiselle Louise?" I said, after a pause.

"Dead!" he answered. "Died of a broken heart."

I said nothing; somehow I felt too queer to speak. We walked on to his rooms in dead silence.

Scarcely had we arrived there than Movart's seconds made their appearance.

Everything was arranged that night, and early next morning we took the train from the city to the place of meeting.

Movart was already on the ground when we arrived. As he stared hard at the Count I saw him start, and a queer look seemed to come into his face. I think he recognised his old enemy then for the first time.

There was no delay in getting the men placed. Stripped to the waist, they stood toe to toe, each with a rapier in his hand.

How they fought those two men, those two deadly enemies! The rapiers darted and writhed like stinging serpents.

On any ordinary occasion they might have been very evenly matched; but as it was, the Count had a slight advantage, for he was a long way the cooler of the two.

Suddenly, as I watched them, Movart sprang back, and I saw a red strain spreading over his white shirt front. His second ran forward at once, but the captain waved him furiously aside:

"To the death!" he cried, springing to the attack again.

"To the death!" responded the Count, and they closed once more.

Movart made a vicious lunge, which the Count parried with his rare skill. The counter-thrust was so swift that I hardly saw it reach its mark; but when I looked there was the hilt of the rapier almost touching the captain's breast.

Even then he fought; fought like a wild cat! Not until his opponent had wrenched the weapon out and stepped back did he go to the ground.

Without even a glance at his fallen foe the Count turned away and walked across to me.

"You will permit me to thank you," he said, "for your services. I shall not forget your kindness."

And then as he glanced round toward the spot where Movart lay, the fire in his eyes seemed to die out suddenly, and gave place to a strange, sad kind of look.

"She is avenged!" he muttered, as if to himself.

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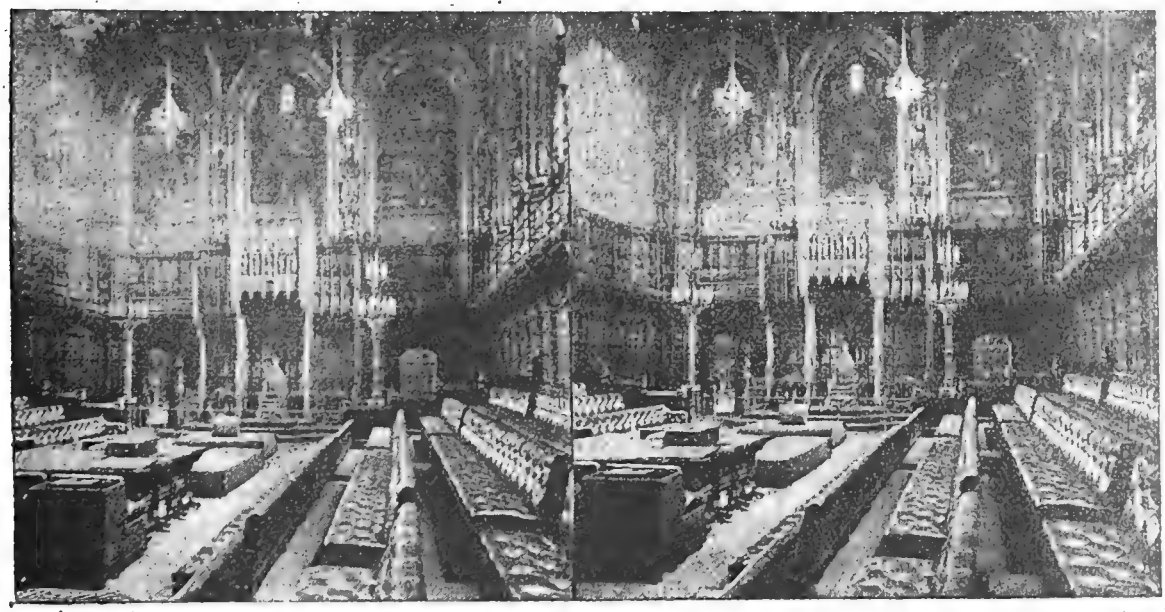
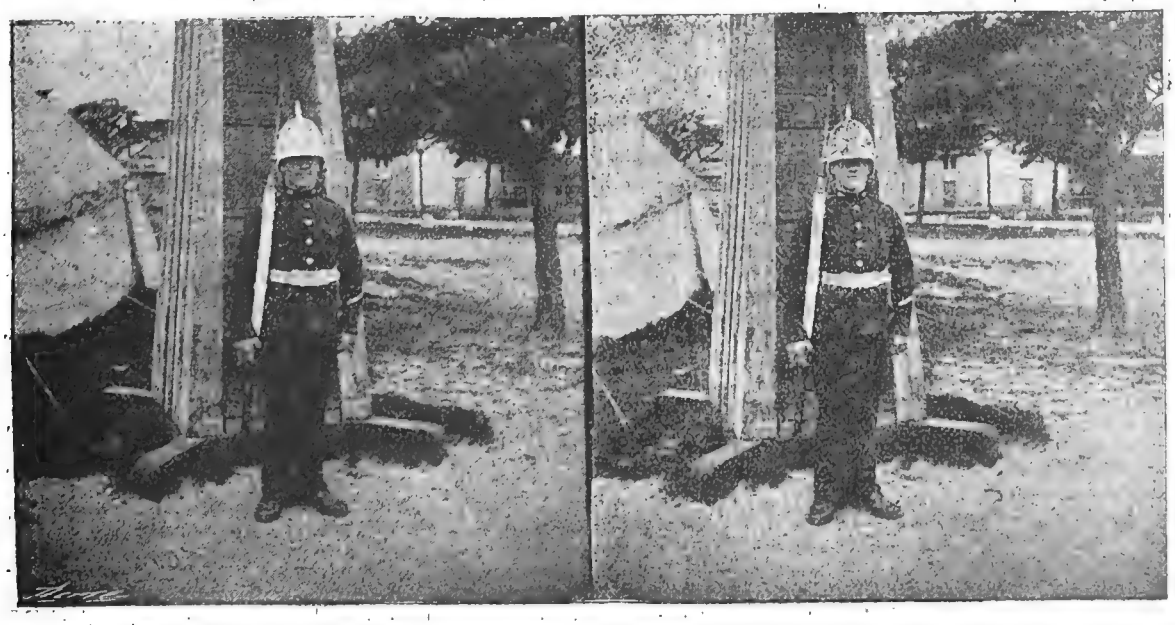
Our Stereoscopic Gallery.



Interior of the House of Lords.



"Sentry Go."

Readers will be pleased to hear that we are now giving away Stereoscopes in connection with our WEEKLY POSTCARD COMPETITION.—See page 526.

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MADGE FORSTER'S LOVE.

"SAVE me! Oh, do help me—they will kill me if they catch me!"

The girl was crouching in front of the kitchen fire, trying to fan the smouldering embers into a flame, when this cry for help reached her ears. She sprang to her feet and turned towards the door, clutching a stout piece of wood and standing erect in an attitude of defence.

She was alone in the farm-house. The farm hands and servants had fled from the district on the receipt of the news that Monmouth's rebel army was in the vicinity and that the King's troops under Faversham were approaching.

Her father had been obliged to leave her during the afternoon and had left with the promise that he would be back again in three hours, but it was now between eight and nine o'clock and he had not returned. Madge Forster had a stout heart, but the situation in which she was placed was disquieting.

In the twilight she found herself confronting a young man—a lad, rather—about her own age, which was just sixteen.

He was dressed in the garb of a peasant, but there was something in his demeanour that indicated higher birth. His face, too, contracted and pale with fear, was not that of a rustic.

"What do you want?" asked Madge, somewhat reassured to find that she had to deal with no more formidable foe than this unarmed boy.

"They are chasing me as a rebel," explained the intruder, still panting for breath. "We are beaten. We lost the fight early this morning and the king's troops are hunting the leaders."

He paused and listened.

"But you are not a leader!" cried the girl. "If I were a rebel, I would show more——"

She was interrupted by the sound of voices at no great distance outside.

The lad sprang towards her and clasped her by the arm.

"They are coming! You think I am a coward, perhaps I am, but it is hard to die so young—to be murdered for what you haven't done! Won't you help me?"

The last words were spoken so pleadingly that Madge wasted no time in reasoning. Her heart triumphed over her head, and without giving a thought to the possible consequences of her action, she caught him by the arm and hurried with him to a door hidden behind a curtain at one end of the room.

"Come down here!" she commanded, leading the way down an awkward flight of steps, resembling a ladder more than a staircase, into a cellar from which came a mouldy odour that suggested disuse. "It's not a nice place, and there are rats sometimes, but a man isn't afraid of rats like a woman. I can hide you down here."

"I must choose between rats and butchers," responded the lad with a slight shiver. "But there is no choice."

The girl led him to the farther end. There was no light; the opening through which the light had entered at one time had long since become overgrown with weeds.

They had to guide themselves round various obstacles, remains of furniture and farming implements and utensils which had for some reason or no reason been stowed away in the cellar from time to time, but at last they reached a huge clothes press very much the worse for wear.

"You had better get in there," said Madge. "It has a lot of rags and rubbish in it and there's no lid, so I don't suppose they would ever think you had hidden yourself in it. The rubbish won't kill you, even if it makes you uncomfortable. Huddle yourself in one corner as much as you can. I'll stir it up a bit, and then if there's a rat inside, perhaps it will jump out. There, jump in!"

Madge left the fugitive to secret himself and hurriedly returned to the kitchen. She had only just time to knock her dress with her hands, in order to shake off traces of dust, when half-a-dozen soldiers headed by an officer entered the room.

"A man has taken refuge in this farm, my girl. Where is he?" The words were spoken sharply, but not unkindly.

It was fortunate for Madge that there was not enough light to enable the officer to see how she had paled at the question. It suddenly dawned upon her that she had been guilty of treason in sheltering a rebel, but it was less on this account than through fear for the safety of the refugee that her face turned colour. Although she had been at considerable pains to find him a hiding place, yet she had not realised the fact that a thorough search might be made for him; she had fancied that she had saved him, but she now recognised that this was a long way from being the case.

As she did not answer promptly, the officer took the matter into his own hands, and, ordering one of his men to light a lantern that stood near the threshold, he handed it to the girl and bade her peremptorily to show them over the house. The girl took the lantern and silently did as she had been ordered.

Three or four men were left on guard round the house, while the officer and the remaining two or three soldiers followed Madge Forster.

She led them from one apartment to another—the parlour, dairy and bedrooms upstairs, they climbed the ladder into a loft, looked out on to the roof, and, in short, made a thorough search, stripping the beds and omitting nothing.

They descended the stairs, fuming at their non-success and went out into the garden and then to the few sheds and out-buildings.

"I think you are wasting your time," remarked Madge quietly, her confidence coming back to her. "The fugitive ran through the garden, no doubt, and escaped through that hole in the hedge. My father is a king's man, everybody knows that about here, and the runaways would not venture here. Ah, here comes my father!"

Lambert Forster arrived at this moment and he carried a pitch-fork which he brandished threateningly. He had seen that there was something amiss and had come prepared to do battle for his daughter, who might be in trouble. He was relieved to find that she was safe and to learn exactly what was wrong.

"We must apologise for disturbing your house, but it was on the king's business," said the officer in conclusion. Then, as the thought struck him, he asked:

"Have you a cellar?"

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Forster replied in the affirmative, but declared that the fugitive could not have gained access to it unobserved by his daughter. To Madge's horror the officer decided to make an inspection of the underground space and the party made their way down the steps.

By the light of two lanterns the men searched the cellar until they came to the clothes press.

"Run your sword into that rubbish," commanded the leader, "if he is there we shall soon know."

Three times the sword blade was buried in the rubbish, and just a faint sound made itself heard the last time.

The man looked at his sword and saw that the tip was tinged red.

A murmur of satisfaction came from the soldiers, but at that instant a rat poked itself through the rubbish, leapt over the side and darted away.

"You have plunged your sword into a rat!" cried Madge, forcing herself to laugh boisterously.

She knew well enough that the soldier's weapon had touched the fugitive, but she was trying to divert attention.

Her father joined in the laugh quite innocently, and the soldiers, not relishing ridicule any more than the rest of mankind, desisted from further search.

Madge was in an agony of apprehension after the soldiers had retired from the farm; she feared that the fugitive might be dangerously wounded, but she dared not tell her father that she had hidden him. She had to wait till he was in bed and asleep before she could venture into the cellar.

She found him sitting on the side of the press, a picture of despair and misery. His right arm was bound round, near the wrist, by a strip of linen.

"Thank heaven that you have come to me!" he cried in evident relief.

She had placed the lantern on a pile near her and it gave them enough light to see each others faces.

"You are brave—for a girl, as brave as many men," continued the hunted rebel fervently.

"It was my duty," stammered Madge, with downcast eyes. To have one of the opposite sex speak to her like this was a new experience.

"You are a girl whom I could love with all my heart. May I kiss you?"

Madge made no reply, but her hands trembled and her head drooped.

She did not resist as the lad bent slightly, for he was a little taller than she, and imprinted a kiss upon her lips.

"Now I must go and endeavour to reach a place of safety before morning," he said.

But Madge detained him; he must have something to eat first, and she also tried to persuade him to wait until the following evening, when it would certainly be safer to make the venture.

The fugitive consented to the first proposition, but declined to agree to the second. Madge fetched him something to refresh himself, and brought him some feminine clothes, which, she said, he could don as a disguise for greater safety.

When the lad emerged from the cellar after making the change of clothing, Madge could not help admiring what an admirable girl he made.

"I must go now, my dear Miss Forster," said he, again taking her hand and clasping it warmly. "I shall never forget what you have done for me. You risked your life to save mine, and I shall come back to you some day to make amends. Good-bye!"

"You will take care?" asked Madge anxiously. "If you were to be caught—oh! I can't bear to think of it!"

The young rebel looked at her curiously for a second. Then he was gone, and the farmer's daughter suddenly remembered that she had never asked his name.

The rebellion was quelled and the life of Forster and his daughter ran its usual peaceful course, undisturbed by the political events which followed during the next three years. Madge had two or three suitors before that time had elapsed, but she gave them no encouragement. Her father could not understand it, but he said nothing, girls were like that sometimes and Madge would alter in time.

But two more years went past, and Madge showed no signs of altering.

She had watched for the return of the fugitive and she would still watch and wait for him. He had said that he would return and she believed that he would come back if he were alive.

The new king was firmly established on the throne and James II. had lost all chance of coming back. Madge had heard the tidings and she wondered whether the young rebel would now be able to seek her out. A few more months passed and Madge's hopes began to sink.

But one summer afternoon her ear caught the sound of bells and she knew that a coach was approaching.

Nearer and nearer came the sound, and then she saw through the window a coach drawn by four horses.

It stopped opposite the house and Madge's heart beat so violently that she could scarcely stand.

She saw the open door and a man descend from the coach; she was disappointed, for this man was much too old to be her unknown friend.

Someone else was about to alight and her eyes were fixed more intently than ever on the door of the coach.

A young woman, beautiful and richly dressed, alighted and ran towards the house.

"It was here!" cried the new-comer. "Ah, there she is, my deliverer!"

She pushed open the door and ran towards Madge with a glad cry, but the latter threw out her arms wildly, swayed a little and then fell unconscious.

The Honourable Betty Harrison was never able to understand the conduct of Madge Forster. She explained to the farmer's daughter that she had adopted male attire and permitted herself to be pursued in order to draw the king's soldiers from the track of her brother, who had been wounded and was lying hidden until help could be obtained. Thanks to Madge, she had succeeded, and all the family had also been successful in getting out of the country; they had remained abroad until the cause of James was utterly lost, when they had concluded that they could return with safety. Betty had taken the first opportunity of visiting the farmer's daughter.

"I might have explained to you," said Betty warmly, "but I thought it best to keep silence."

Madge Forster smiled faintly, but her demeanour was so strange in the eyes of Betty Harrison that the visit was neither so pleasant nor so long as it would otherwise have been.

Betty Harrison always felt somewhat hurt at Madge Forster's pride, as she considered it, for she would accept no money nor any assistance that would take her out of her own humble station of life and make life more comfortable for her, nor did she evince any desire that the friendship so strangely begun should be continued.

Madge Forster never married.

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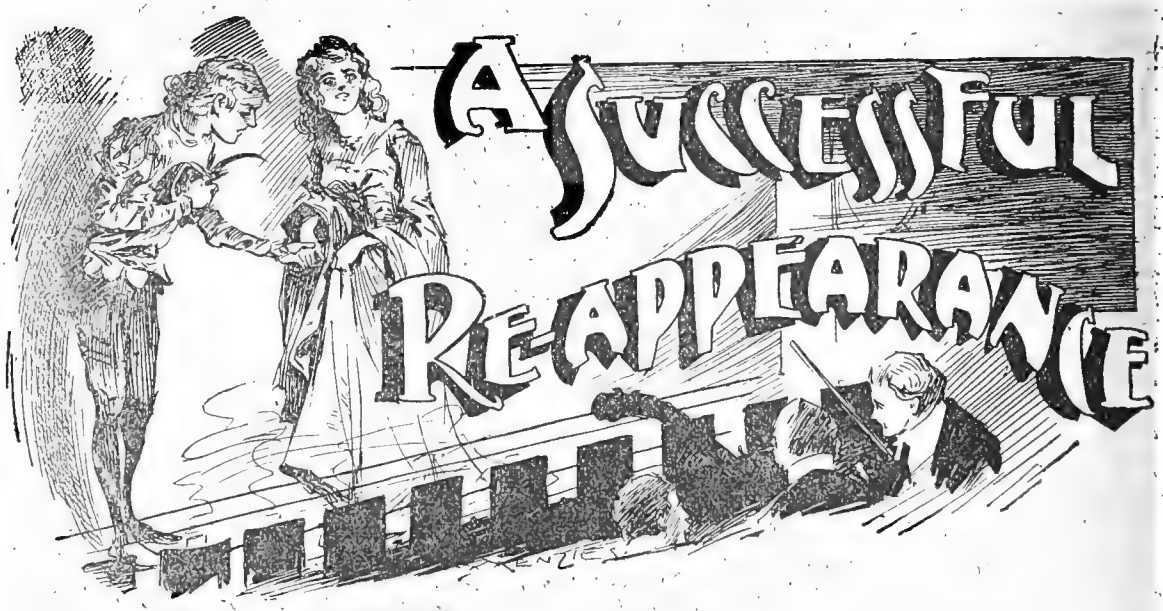

WHEN the theatre-going public thought of Bertram Proctor, which was not often, it was with the impression that he was enjoying well-earned rest in the evening of life.

He had been a great star in his time, but that time was in reality long past, although his final appearance on the stage dated back only five years.

To tell the plain truth, Bertram Proctor had out-lived himself as an actor; he had achieved a great name, and his love for his profession and for celebrity had caused him to remain on the boards until both his bodily and mental faculties began to fail. He would have done far better to have retired years before he actually did seek repose in the little country village where he had first seen the light; everybody said that he was spoiling his reputation, everybody recognised that his day was over, except Proctor himself.

He believed that he was still a grand actor, a leading light of the profession and the idol of the public. So he continued to play his favourite characters in his own theatre, and the illusion was maintained to a large extent by the patrons of his theatre, who applauded him on his occasional appearances more out of pity than by reason of his acting.

It was a sad spectacle to see this broken man trying to throw the same vigour into the parts of Romeo and other characters in which he had made his name in the past; and it was with a sense of relief that the public heard that Bertram Proctor had given up the stage, sold his theatre and retired into "country."

Robert Harlow mused somewhat in this strain as he made his way on foot from the nearest railway-station to the little country house occupied by Procter, his wife and unmarried daughter. Harlow owed a debt of gratitude to Proctor for having given him his first opportunity of showing his ability. From that moment he had steadily mounted the ladder of success.

He had been going to see Proctor time after time since the latter's retirement, but something had always turned up to prevent him; so five years had slipped away and Harlow, awakening to this fact and feeling a sense of shame at his own ingratitude, had seized the chance presented by the brief interval between the production of a new play in order to pay the promised visit.

He was very cordially welcomed by all the family, and was soon comfortably seated with his old friend in a cosy room looking upon a garden that refreshed the eyes after the stolid bricks and mortar of the town; the chairs were placed near the open window, cigars were lighted and the conversation at once fell upon past experiences.

Harlow was grieved to see that time had laid a heavy hand upon Proctor; his face was withered and shrunken, his hands thin and trembling, his frame bent and feeble. It was a curious contrast to turn his eyes from this enfeebled figure to the picture on the wall close by—a drawing of Proctor as Romeo, a man in the flush of manhood, the very embodiment of virility.

Bertram Proctor watched the direction of his gaze and smiled with satisfaction.

"That was drawn a long time ago," he began proudly, "but——"

He was interrupted by a slight fit of coughing.

"You had a long career, sir," said Harlow, speaking with the deference which he had always considered to be due to so great a man. "I can well understand that you desire rest."

His cheeks flushed slightly in spite of himself as he made this remark, for he shared the general opinion that Bertram Proctor ought to have retired long ago and it seemed to him that even the old man's dulled eye would read his thoughts. But he was unprepared for the outburst which followed his words.

"Desire rest! I did not want rest, it was not my wish that we should bury ourselves alive in this place and give up all the glory of the profession! I came here to please my wife and daughter, not myself. I am as strong and as good as ever! I could play Romeo every bit as well now as I could when that picture was drawn." For an instant the old man's eyes gleamed again with the old fire.

Abashed by this unexpected turn of the conversation, Harlow stammered out incoherent words which had no

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meaning. Before he had time to recover himself, Proctor was pulling him by the arm towards the door.

"Come with me and I will show you!" cried the old actor excitedly. "Twelve months ago a man told me that I had lost my power, but I proved that he was wrong. Now I will prove it to you!"

"No, no; you mistake me," expostulated Harlow, still allowing himself to be dragged by Proctor through the passage and up a wide staircase. "I said no such thing; I did not for a moment dream that you could be——".

"Very well!" interrupted Proctor, mollified. "But come along with me all the same, I feel the fire of it on me now and I should like to show you that I am the same as ever."

The visitor yielded to the request and followed his host across a wide landing and into a back room which was fitted in every respect like an actor's dressing room, even to the smallest detail.

Harlow started as he entered, for he recognised that it was an exact counterpart of Proctor's old room at the "Royal."

"There!" cried Proctor, triumphantly, as he noted the look of surprise on Harlow's face. "Ha! ha! Now you go back, go downstairs to my wife and daughter and tell them that I will be down again soon. They'll understand. Ha! ha!"

Much puzzled by the strange behaviour of his old patron, Harlow made his way across the landing and down the stairs, at the foot of which he was met by Mrs. Proctor.

He looked at her inquiringly, but without uttering a word. She shook her head sadly.

"Come with me and wait," she said somewhat mournfully. "He will not be long."

She led him into another room at the end of which was a raised platform and a curtain; chairs were arranged round the room and in the centre, in front of the curtain and platform, as one might imagine an improvised theatre for amateur performances. Silently she conducted him to a seat in the centre, seating herself on his right, while the daughter, just as silently, took a seat on the left.

"Watch us and do exactly as we do," said Mrs. Proctor in a tone of intreaty. "Do this to please him."

More mystified than ever, Harlow nodded in response and waited. He lost himself in a reverie from which he was aroused by the faint tinkle of a bell. Immediately the curtain went up, discovering Proctor dressed as Romeo.

With faltering voice and trembling figure, the old man went through the balcony scene, trying his very utmost to emulate his former powerful rendering, but making such a grotesque parody that the tears came into Harlow's eyes.

Mrs. Proctor and her daughter acted their parts as spectators to perfection; they applauded the great passages and nudged their guest to do the same whenever he forgot to imitate them.

It was torture to Harlow, and he could see that it was the same to the two women who sat on either side, and he heaved a sigh—as though awaking from some

"Come with me and I will show you!" cried the old actor excitedly.

nightmare—when this miserable performance was finished and Proctor had made his bow before the curtain in response to the mock applause of the small audience.

"Now you know better!" cried Proctor triumphantly as he bade his guest farewell on the following day. It was at least the fiftieth time he had made that observation since the previous evening. "They mustn't think

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that I have left the stage for ever; you must tell them, when you get back, they are labouring under a mistake; it was to please my wife and daughter, and I shall make my re-appearance on the old stage before long. Then ——Ah!"

He drew a long breath that said more than half-an-hour's talk could have conveyed.

Six months month later, Harlow received a letter from Mrs. Proctor, inclosing a poster. This bill, and the letter, told him that Proctor was to make his re-appearance on the stage within a fortnight, but this return to professional life was to begin by a performance in the theatre of the market town nearest to Proctor's house.

They had persuaded him to give up his notion of

He recognised the voices of his wife and the manager.

making his first appearance in London, so the actor's wife told Harlow; he was to appear at the theatre as a kind of trial-performance.

Mrs. Proctor sent him a ticket, but Harlow was not free and he was sincerely glad that he had a good excuse, for he could not bear to think what the result would be. He heard it all, a little later.

The special performance of "*Romeo and Juliet*" was billed all over the little town, and the name of the once celebrated Bertram Proctor met the gaze of the public once more in bold type. "Re-appearance of Bertram Proctor in his creation of Romeo," and other notices to that effect were to be met everywhere. The old actor himself was full of pride and confident that a glorious reception awaited him on his return to the stage; he chafed at the notion of beginning a new lease of professional life under such conditions, even although there was only to be one performance in this out-of-the-way place, but it was to please his wife and daughter, and he would soon be in London again!

At last the great evening arrived, and Proctor and his two faithful companions made their way to the theatre. Although it was yet early, there was a crowd outside the doors and a faint cheer arose as they passed through the people to the stage-door. The old Romeo's face became tinged with red and his eyes lighted up with pride.

"You see how they welcome me," he whispered to his wife as the door closed behind them. "Ah! It will be a glorious night."

The theatre was filled with people eager to give Bertram Proctor a good reception. That was the impression which the actor himself, taking a peep at the auditorium before the play began, derived from the appearance presented by the interior of the theatre.

There was to be another little scene — concerning which he had only just been informed—he was to be presented with an illuminated address at the close of the performance in recognition of his services to the histrionic art, and as an expression of good wishes for his future career.

The curtain rose and the play proceeded; the entrance of Romeo was a signal for a storm of applause which prevented the actor from speaking for at least two minutes.

It was a feeble performance, making a farce of the tragedy, but the audience was sympathetic and applauded boisterously all the important passages. When the curtain fell, Proctor was called in front, and then the presentation was made by the manager.

No man ever was more happy and more proud, no actor was ever more confident of himself, than was Proctor as he went back to his dressing room to change his clothes and get rid of his make-up in order to rejoin his wife and daughter who were waiting for him in the manager's small private room off the main entrance. He had proved to the world—for the market town was now "the world" to him, seeing that the success of the evening would be told in the newspapers all over the country—that he was still the same, that "Richard was himself again," as he phrased it. If he had been received with such warmth by these people, what would his reception be among the intellectual theatre-goers of the Metropolis and the Great Cities!

When he emerged from the dressing-room, the short,

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tortuous flight of stairs leading to the lobby was in darkness. The audience had dispersed half-an-hour before, the attendants were waiting to lock up and all the lights were out, even those in the lobby and at the door. Holding the address carefully, lovingly, in his left hand, he descended the stairs and passed along the lobby, wondering where the two women were waiting for him.

He observed a thin streak of light which he concluded to indicate that a door was not quite closed; that must be the manager's room, and he would find them waiting for him there. He hurried towards this door and was about to push it open when the sound of voices, as though of persons arguing some disputed point, reached his ears and brought him to a standstill. He recognised the voices of his wife and the manager.

"I think that is rather too much," Mrs. Proctor was saying. "I admit that there was some trouble connected with it, but I think you ought to be able to do it for less than that."

"My dear Madam," replied the manager testily—how different was his tone now from what it had been when making the presentation!—"I can't do it for one penny less! Trouble, indeed! I should think so! I don't say that we are doing very good business just now, but you will understand that we have the usual expenses this evening and that we have not taken one sixpence at the door. I——"

"But surely your expenses, together with the loss of profit, do not reach the figure you are asking!" expostulated Mrs. Proctor speaking firmly, but sadly.

"There was the cost of the address," continued the manager, who was evidently annoyed, "and in addition to all that, I actually had to pay or give free drinks to a lot of the people who were in the theatre to-night in order to get them to come and sit it out. Why, not half of them would have entered the theatre at all to see the old man make a fool of himself, and I'm quite sure that not one of them would have sat it out! Well," he concluded in a milder tone, as he saw how his words pained the good woman. "I don't think so. Look here I'll knock off £5. You know, if you get up little deceptions of this kind just to please the old—gentleman, and make him believe that he is still a great actor, you must pay for it. Now, that settles it. Hallo, what's that?"

He had heard a noise outside. Proctor had listened to it all; the scales had fallen from his eyes and he mentally saw himself as others saw him. It was all a hoax—the reception, the applause, the presentation—he had not attracted these people, they had been bribed to come!

He stood for a moment, stunned by the revelation; then there was a singing noise in his ears, everything seemed to be going round and he fell heavily to the ground, still holding the illuminated address.

When the three occupants of the manager's room rushed into the lobby, they nearly fell over the prostrate form which was now lighted up by the glimmering gas jets shining through the open door. They knelt beside him, but Bertram Proctor was dead. He had made his last appearance on the stage of life.

Employer: "I'd engage you for the place at once, only I must have a married man."

Applicant: "Keep the place open for an hour, sir; I'll arrange that. It's easier to get married than to get a job."

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SUMMARY.

THE steamship *Trojan* is homeward bound from the Cape. On board is Michael Standridge, who is returning to England from the Kimberley diamond fields, in possession of the "Kimberley Elephant," the largest diamond found in the colony. On the ship is his half-brother, Simon Hoathley. On the way up the English Channel the latter steals into the miner's cabin with the intention of murdering him and obtaining possession of the diamond. The miner, however, is on the alert, and presents a pistol at the intruder's head. Knowing that Hoathley will make another attempt to secure the diamond, Standridge resolves to "blind the trail."

As the vessel is passing the Isle of Wight he lowers himself into the water and swims to the shore. Michael sells his diamond for £20,000 to Messrs. Strauss and Lightfoot, whose clerk, Swinley Tasker, he discovers in an attempt to rob him of £35. Michael reads Tasker a lecture, kicks him, and departs—having made an enemy of this rascal. Reading is where Michael expects to find news of his daughter, and he purchases Kennett's Cross, a dilapidated farmhouse in the neighbourhood, this house meeting his requirements by being very secluded, and on a clay soil suitable for brickmaking.

CHAPTER IV. (*continued*).

The one with whom Michael came most into contact was Cuthbert Blakesly, the cashier at the Metropolitan Counties Bank at Reading. It was Blakesly's duty to attend to the frequent drains which Michael made on his banking account, and the young man necessarily knew more of "Mr. Wilson's" business than anyone in those parts, save Mr. Oakley, the manager. The rugged old miner took rather a fancy to the stalwart athlete who had been "meant for a soldier," but owing to family reverses was constrained to earn his bread by shovelling sovereigns across the counter.

"You ought to be out in the 'fields,' my lad, with a pick and a shovel in those strong hands of yours," Michael said one day, "you'd find getting the stuff for yourself pleasanter work than messing it about with that scoop for other folk."

Cuthbert smiled at the eccentric customer and told him he should like it well enough if he hadn't certain reasons for staying in England.

"But you've let the cat out of the bag at last, Mr. Wilson," he continued. "I should never have had the impertinence to broach the subject myself, but your remark suggests that you have done some gold digging yourself."

Then Michael thawed a little, and described some of his earlier experiences in America, without giving any inkling of his later South African exploits. A mutual liking sprang from the business acquaintance thus begun, and on one or two occasions when Michael was in Reading he entertained the cashier at luncheon at the hotel. His fellow clerks and others, in chaffing Blakesly, prophesied that it was only a question of time before he would be admitted to the mysteries of Kennett's Cross. But months went by without the young man being invited to cross the threshold of Michael's hermitage, and nothing came of the friendly chats, except that Cuthbert Blakesly was accounted by popular rumour to be on intimate terms with the recluse.

Like most of its kind the rumour was exaggerated, but it had its effect on the events which were to come.

And rumour shortly afterwards had something more congenial to feed on when it became known that the owner of Kennett's Cross had purchased from a marine store dealer in the town a secondhand strong-room door, built of iron, and furnished with an impregnable lock, which he had carted off to the lonely house at the cross roads.

The gossips wagged their heads freely over the episode for a week or two, firmly establishing Michael's reputation as the possessor of hoarded wealth, and then, as generally happens when doubt about a new comer's affairs has grown into certainty, the public interest in him began to decline.

It was after Michael had finished making and laying his bricks that he found his daughter. Spring had come round again when, a week before the May-day with which this chapter opened, he was driving home from one of his periodical journeys into Reading for supplies. He had got well out into the open country, and was passing the grounds of "The Limes," when he met with an accident, trifling enough in itself but pregnant with consequences.

Owing to a defective linch-pin one of the wheels of the cart came off, and Michael was thrown out on to the turf at at the side of the road. He was a bit shaken by the fall, but he was able to pick himself up and to secure the frightened pony before more damage was done. There was no one in sight to give him a helping hand, so he hitched the pony to the gate of "The Limes," and, with a colonial's faith in the hospitality of his fellow creatures, started up the drive to the house to procure the necessary assistance.

As he was traversing that portion of the drive which skirted the shrubbery he heard voices, and, on emerging into a full view of the house and garden, he saw that the sounds proceeded from a party taking tea on the lawn. Two ladies, one elderly and extremely stout, the other young and slim, were seated in hammock chairs, while a gentleman in knickerbockers—presumably the owner of a bicycle that was leaning against a tree—stood talking to them, cap in hand. Michael approached the group and was commencing to speak of his accident when he was surprised to recognise in the attendant cavalier none other than his friend the cashier at the bank. Cuthbert, as soon as he grasped the situation, stopped his request with ready offers of help, and putting down his cup at once prepared to accompany Michael to the scene of the disaster.

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"This is a friend of mine, Mrs. Bonfield," he said. "You will excuse me, I know, while I go to his assistance. Let me introduce you—Mr. Wilson of Kennett's Cross; Mrs. Bonfield and Miss Bonfield."

Michael removed his hat from his grizzled head and bowed politely to the elder lady, and turned with the same intent towards her companion. The girl was wearing a large sun hat, and as she raised her hand to acknowledge his salute, Michael caught his first full view of her features. The effect upon him was startling in its suddenness and painful in its intensity. With a quick gesture he raised his hand to shade his wondering eyes, drew back a pace or two, then started forward, and exclaimed in a breaking voice:

"It is her living image; I cannot be mistaken! Madam," he went on, turning passionately to Mrs. Bonfield, "I intreat you to pardon me and to grant me the favour of a few minutes conversation alone. I will explain my strange behaviour, and you, perhaps, can explain that which will make it seem not so strange after all."

Mrs. Bonfield showed little less perturbation at the unexpected development than Michael himself, and evinced a nervous anxiety that he should say no more before the young people.

"Marion, dear," she said quickly, "you had better run into the house for a little while, and you, Mr. Blakesly, might go and see after this gentleman's pony."

"Her name is Marion, then!" Michael said, as soon as the two wondering faces had disappeared. "Madam, again I beg you to forgive me if I am wrong, but if my instinct prompts me right, that young lady is no child of yours. She is the exact likeness of what my wife was at her age; she is just what my missing daughter should be now; her very name is the same. I have expected to find her in these parts. Tell me, dear lady, and tell me truly; is it as I suppose?"

The mistress of "The Limes" buried her broad face in her hands and began to weep.

"I have always dreaded this day," she almost wailed at last. "It is hard that this should happen after Marion has grown to be so necessary to me. There seems to be a conspiracy to rob me of the girl. First young Blakesly, and now it is you, sir. Who think you has a better right to her than the lonely old woman who has cherished her all these years?"

The implied admission was enough for Michael, and he could afford to wait patiently now for a fuller explanation. By degrees Mrs. Bonfield's agitation subsided, and then she told him the story of her adopted daughter's life, so far as it was known to her.

One winter morning, eighteen years ago, after a terrible snowstorm, the gardener at "The Limes" had come to the kitchen with the startling intelligence that a woman, apparently a tramp, was lying in the shrubbery dead, or dying of the cold, with a child hugged to her breast. Mrs. Bonfield, then, as now, resident at "The Limes"—she incidentally described herself as a widow from the year of her marriage—at once gave orders that the unfortunates should be brought to the house, and that everything should be done for their restoration and comfort.

They were put to bed and a doctor was sent for, but before his arrival the woman died of exhaustion and exposure, after rallying just enough to point to her four-year-old daughter and mutter the one word—Marion. The child recovered under careful nursing, and Mrs. Bonfield had seized the opportunity to relieve her own solitude by adopting the little waif. There were no means of identifying the wanderers. The dead woman's clothes were threadbare and ragged; her boots were dropping from her feet, and it was supposed that she had been making her way to Reading when she crept into the shrubbery to seek some slight shelter from the pitiless fury of the storm. But all was

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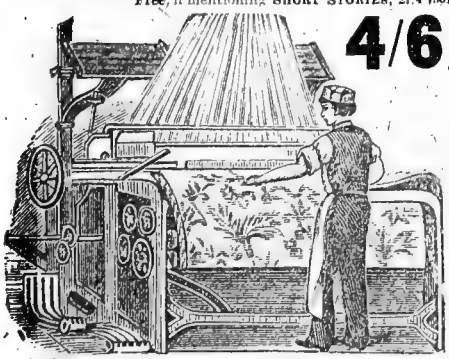

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surmise, and nothing had ever transpired to shed any light on the poor nameless creature's history. All the property found upon her was sevenpence-halfpenny in bronze, while round the child's neck was a necklace of no value made of little shells.

"Pink shells?" interrupted Michael breathlessly.

Mrs. Bonfield assented.

"That clears away the last doubt, then," said Michael. "That poor outcast soul was my wife, and this bonny lass is, indeed, my daughter."

Of Marion's uneventful life at her new home there was but little to tell. Both her infancy and girlhood had evidently been carefully watched and tended, and Mrs. Bonfield had grown to look upon her with real affection; though Michael, deeply grateful as he was, could not help thinking that there was a strong leaven of selfishness in the old lady's protestations of regard. She seemed to think of her adopted daughter chiefly as one who ministered to her real or fancied ailments, and as an indispensable companion to a childless woman.

This feeling was specially noticeable in Mrs. Bonfield's bitter lamentations over the attachment which she described as having sprung up—sorely against her wish—between Marion and the young cashier. She had nothing to urge against Cuthbert Blakesly himself except his obvious desire to rob her of her *protégée*, and now she pathetically bewailed the girl's impending removal by her father.

Altogether, the mistress of "The Limes" impressed the shrewd old traveller as a rather weak and unreliable woman, whose natural good-nature had been brought into subjection by chronic anxiety for her own personal comfort. Michael took the cue, and promptly reassured her as to Marion's removal. He should not dream of taking his daughter away from her kind protectress, at any rate at present—if for no other reason, because he had no home fit to receive her; and as to Cuthbert Blakesly, he should want to know a good deal more of the young man before he sanctioned a definite engagement.

When the shell necklace had been produced and recognised, Marion was sent for, and Michael—calling himself by his own name for the first time since his return—made himself known to his daughter. Mrs. Bonfield, satisfied that the girl would be left with her, corroborated Michael's assertion, and Marion listened eagerly to so much of her childhood's history as he thought well to break to her.

The subtle instinct which is stronger than proof, opened Marion's heart, and she accepted the new position with unfeigned joy, lavishing such tenderness on the battered old wanderer that his soul warmed with the promise of a bright sunset to his stormy life. Then Cuthbert Blakesly was told the news, and Michael Standridge—decidedly the guest of the evening—remained to supper. Before he resumed his interrupted drive to Kennett's Cross he hinted mysteriously at a secret affecting Marion's future, which he should be ready to reveal in a few days. "It is a secret which would have remained a secret if it had not been for this day's discovery," he added.

These events took place on a Saturday, and during the ensuing week Michael spent some portion of every day at "The Limes," father and daughter having many long talks together in the shady old garden. There was no secret about the relationship between the two, and Michael had resumed his own proper name, alleging that the temporary change had been made "for business reasons," and would be more fully explained when he divulged the secret to which he had alluded. He spoke freely to Marion about Cuthbert Blakesly, and, without committing himself to the definite sanction of an engagement, expressed no dissatisfaction at Cuthbert's visits to "The Limes."

So it was that when Saturday came round again Marion was sitting, as we have seen, in the rose garden, waiting in the first place for her father, who had as yet failed to keep his promise of looking in during the morning, and, secondly, for Cuthbert Blakesly, whose employment at the bank set him free at an earlier hour on the last day of the week. Mrs. Bonfield was indulging in a siesta, and Marion was in hopes that one or both of her visitors would arrive in time for a long chat before the old lady awoke. It was already considerably past Cuthbert's usual hour, and the girl was beginning to grow impatient when her lover's tall figure appeared in the entrance of the rose garden, and in another moment he was at her side.

"How late you are, Cuthbert," said Marion after the first greeting. They were on very good terms, these two.

"I came on foot, dear," explained the young man, picking a spray of yellow jessamine and squeezing the scented blossoms in his palm. "My bicycle wanted cleaning, so I left it at home to-day."

"I know you are very particular about the brightness of that wonderful machine," laughed Marion; "but the roads have been so hard and dry lately it cannot have been very bad. I will forgive you, though, now that you are here. I wonder where father is," she added. "He said he would come this morning, but he has not been yet. Has he been at the bank? Have you seen anything of him?"

"No," replied Blakesly, "he has not been to our place to-day. I have not seen him since——" Here the cashier paused to drive away a bee that was buzzing over Marion's head, and when he resumed, he appeared to have lost the thread of his sentence. "Let me see," he continued, "I met Mr. Standridge here on Wednesday evening, and he was at the bank on Thursday. You, I suppose, have seen him since then?"

"He was with me yesterday," said Marion. "He spoke a good deal of you, and kindly; but he does not seem to have made up his mind as yet."

"That bears out——" Cuthbert was beginning, but he checked himself and went on, "I mean, I feel quite certain, dear, it will be as we wish; but he naturally wants to know a little more of me before he intrusts his new-found treasure to my care."

"I wish the dear old man would give up living at that outlandish place all alone," said the girl. "I begged him to let me come and keep house for him, but he would not hear of it. His gratitude towards Mrs. Bonfield is the reason, I think. He will not even allow me to go to see him there till he has told me his wonderful secret, and that is not to be till he has 'provided me a bodyguard,' he said. What could he mean by that?"

"I don't know, dear, unless I am to be the bodyguard," said Cuthbert, thoughtfully. "But we shall see your father in a minute, I think. Did you not hear the sound of wheels stopping at the gate?"

The two sat in silence, waiting for the stalwart form of the old miner to appear at the gap in the privet hedge. The bees hummed among the roses, and a blackbird in the shrubbery was commencing his evening song. All was peaceful and calm, with the moving stillness of country springtime, and for a moment or two, as the lovers waited, the very air seemed charged with happiness. Then footsteps sounded on the gravel drive, and Marion's hand stole out to rest for one brief second on Cuthbert's arm.

"You must learn to love my father for my sake, dear," she whispered, as a black shadow darkened the entrance to the rose garden.

But it was not her father who brought their privacy to an end. The superintendent of the county police stepped quickly through the opening, followed by an inspector and a constable in uniform. Cuthbert, as he sprang to his feet to meet them, noticed that they all looked very grave.

"Is anything wrong at the bank, Mr. Gunning?" he asked, addressing the superintendent, whom he knew very well.

"Not at the bank, Mr. Blakesly," said the official, glancing past him to Marion, and lowering his voice a little as he went on; "it is something more serious. It is my duty to inform you that anything you say will be taken down and

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used against you. I have here a warrant for your arrest, Cuthbert Blakesly, on the charge of murdering Michael Standridge — otherwise known as Thomas Wilson—at Kennett's Cross last night. You must consider yourself my prisoner."

CHAPTER V.

Birds of a Feather.

That same afternoon while Marion Standridge sat waiting in the garden of the Limes for the lover who only came to be so sternly snatched from her, and for the father whom she was destined never to see again, another rendezvous of a different character was being kept far away in the hum and turmoil of the Metropolis.

It being Saturday, a matinée performance was in progress at the Royal Music-Hall, and that popular place of entertainment was crammed with sightseers released from toil by the weekly half-holiday. But though the fourth turn was on, and a "star comique" was evoking shouts of laughter from the audience, the entertainment seemed to have no attraction for Mr. Swinley Tasker. The diamond-broker's clerk had been one of the first to pay for admission at the box-office, but instead of passing into the auditorium he had remained in the long vestibule, pacing impatiently up and down, and scanning with an almost hungry eagerness the faces of those who entered from the street.

As an habitué of the place, Mr. Tasker had a free-and-easy acquaintance with most of the other habitués, and from time to time he was spoken to by individuals of anything but Exeter Hall appearance as they traversed the vestibule. By many of them he was chaffed upon his lonely vigil, and by some he was pressed to come inside to the bar, but his suave manners seemed to have deserted him for once, and he persistently and curtly declined to be seduced from his post. At length, however, a more than usually boisterous party of deadheads came in and, surrounding Mr. Lightfoot's clerk with noisy greetings, insisted on his "standing treat to the crowd."

The new arrivals were members of the staff of the *Yeller Feller*, a sporting newspaper of lively tendencies which chiefly throve by the peculiar method of chronicling the orgies, real or supposed, of its contributors. Under the necessity of imparting realism to their "copy," these worthies spent their lives and themselves in a weary round of alcoholic "gaiety," and formed the centre round which revolved the shop-boy Bohemianism of London. They were all written of, and known by, more or less descriptive *sobriquets*, and it was considered quite the smart thing by would-be fast clerks to be on speaking terms with the "Piffler" and the "Slinker" of the *Yeller Feller*.

Swinley Tasker set much store by the acquaintance he had scraped with these roystering blades, and in his desire to cultivate intimate relations with them did not see his way to declining the proposal without endangering his footing.

With the best grace he could assume he therefore joined the party and accompanied them to the bar in the auditorium, where conviviality soon became the order of the day. Nevertheless, he remained nervous and preoccupied, and every now and then his eyes would stray to the entrance despite his efforts to be sociable.

"You fellows are late to-day—behind your usual time, I think?" he said, when they had pledged each other in the solemn fashion affected by boon companions.

"Yes," replied one; "we were waiting for Phipson of the *Evening Telegraph*. He's a pal, you know—always round the town with us. The poor beggar couldn't get away because their last edition had to be kept back a bit over some murder down in the country."

"Gad," said Tasker with an attempt at gaiety, "you journalists are no better than slaves. Fancy being kept in like a schoolboy because some joker has committed murder fifty miles away."

"The doing of the deed would be more in your line, eh, old chap?" retorted the "Slinker" with what passed for ready wit in his circle. "But here comes Phipson," he added, as a seedy-looking, washed-out, young-old man came up to join them. "Well, you dilatory crime-monger; what is this tragedy that has kept you?"

"I don't know much more than you do," was the reply. "The details we expected are not forthcoming, and we went to press without them—nothing but the bare fact. As it stands at present, the case doesn't seem to be of any unusual interest."

"I'll bet you anything you like I can repeat word for word one line of your paragraph about it," said another of the sporting journalists.

"You mean the usual statement that the police are in possession of a clue which they are confident will lead to an early arrest?" returned Phipson. "Yes, that's in, of course."

"What is the locality?" put in Tasker indifferently, and for the sake of joining in the conversation. Even while he spoke he was still throwing those furtive glances towards the entrance to the hall.

"Somewhere down Reading way," replied the *Evening Telegraph* man. "Victim's name either Standridge or Wilson—there seems to be some muddle about it—but the first telegram said he was an old man with money. A common case of burglary and murder, I should say, with nothing sensational in it. But hang the shop. Here come the Sisters Milwood; it is the only 'turn' here I'm not tired of."

It was perhaps fortunate for Swinley Tasker that the popular favourites made their *entrée* at that moment, for the eyes of the party were directed at the twin visions of bespangled beauty on the stage, and so missed seeing the ashy grey pallor which stole over his face at Phipson's words, and the reeling stagger that nearly brought him to the ground. With a great effort Tasker steadied himself by clutching the bar while he gulped down the remainder of his drink, and then slipped back into the vestibule, his retreat covered by the tumultuous applause that greeted the first shrill notes of the "Sisters" duet. With those raucous tones and the braying of the orchestra dinning in his ears he hurried to the street door and had not long to wait before a newspaper boy hove in sight crying the last edition of the *Evening Telegraph*.

Quickly grabbing a copy Tasker sat down on one of the sofas in the vestibule, and turned the sheet about till he found what he wanted. The paragraph on which his attention finally became riveted ran as follows:

MURDER NEAR READING.

Early this morning it was discovered that Michael Standridge, an elderly gentleman residing alone at Kennett's Cross, five miles from Reading, had been brutally murdered during the night by some person who up to the time of telegraphing is still at large. The deceased, who was also known by the name of Wilson, was supposed to be possessed of considerable property, robbery being doubtless the motive of the crime. The police were quickly on the spot, and we understand that they have been so hot on the scent that an arrest may be expected at any moment.

The muscles of Tasker's mobile features twitched as he read, and he was about to peruse the notice a second time, when the shadow of a skinny finger fell upon the paper, and he became conscious that someone was standing over him. Looking up with a start his nervous gaze was met by a burning eye, whose fellow was wandering off in the direction of the curtain that veiled the entrance to the auditorium.

"It's cheering to think they have got a clue, my young friend, isn't it?" said the owner of the uncanny optics, pointing to the paper. "What a debt of gratitude we owe to the police for their ever-watchful care."

The sudden alarm on Tasker's face became blended with an admixture of surprised relief as he recognised in the spare, black-coated figure bending over him the person with whom he was keeping tryst.

(To be continued.)

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A GREAT OFFER.

The *Daily Express* has made an exclusive arrangement with Messrs. W. and R. Chambers, the well-known publishers, by which ten thousand sets of "Chambers's Encyclopædia" (Twentieth Century Issue) are to be distributed to its readers at a specially low price, and on the popular plan of payment by monthly instalment.

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I enclose 3s. Please send me Chambers's Encyclopædia (20th Century Issue).

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THE EDITOR'S PAGE.

Once upon a time Byron wrote that "one drop of ink" properly used, was calculated to "make millions think." A poor prosaic editor has evidently made *one* reflect, by a few words written a week or two ago. Thus writes the one, a young lady living north of the Tweed:

"In *Short Stories* there is a letter from Reggie bemoaning the humdrum spirit of the times. Now, my dear editor, don't be cross with me, will you? [Of course not.—Ed.] and don't think me rude if I ask whether your correspondent is Mr. S. B., of ——— Street, Derby. I shall be everlastingly indebted to you if you will favour me. You see, I used to know someone of that name. I was awfully unkind to him, and now I would like to make amends if it is not too late."

There, what think you of that? Are not those few simple sentences suggestive of a real life romance? Love, probably unrequited, and now a desire on the maiden's part to make amends. Alas, poor maiden! my previous correspondent was not S. B. of Derby. Therefore, I cannot help you, unless, mayhap, these words should meet the eye of your erstwhile friend. In which case, perhaps, he will drop me a line.

❦❦❦

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try, again," is the motto of Mrs. E. R. (Bradford). "Many thanks for your beautiful book," she writes. "On opening *Short Stories* of April 13th, and seeing Miss A. N.'s letter, I thought I would just drop a line. I am quite sure if Miss A. N. will only be a constant reader and sender of storyettes every week, never miss, she will in time receive a prize. I myself have been a constant sender, also reader, of your most interesting paper for quite three years, and have received a good few books, also the guinea prize. The papers I always give to my friends when we have read them, and I show my prizes to everybody I come across, knowing that by doing so I have got a good few new readers."

❦❦❦

For which I tender my most sincere thanks. If only every reader would do likewise, I—but you will do likewise, won't you?

❦❦❦

No, "Kitcat," I am not going to throw open the columns of *Short Stories* to the publication of the idiotical riddles you refer to. However, I print the one you send, hoping that the contemplation of it in cold type will fill you with remorse. Here it is:

What was it Ag-(k) new?
The place where Gains burrow (Gainsborough).

You really think that funny "Kitkat"? Dear me!

❦❦❦

"Sam" is deeply in love with "Clara," and he believes she loves him in return. But for the life of him he cannot pluck up courage to ask her to be his wife. For three years they have "kept company," and for months past he has periodically resolved to put the momentous question, but at the critical moment his courage has oozed out of his boots. "What am I to do?" he asks. "Please don't advise me in general terms, but do try and give me a specific plan. I have thought of getting a friend to propose for me. What do you think of the plan?"

Bad, "Sam," bad. Send another fellow to propose for you, and you run the risk of losing your girl, even as Miles Standish did. And I am not sure that you wouldn't deserve it. Since, however, you seem to be very fond of "Clara," I'll help you all I can. I'll propose for you myself. Here goes:

"Miss Blank—Clara—forgive Sam, but he loves you with a love that is stronger than life. From the moment when his eyes first encountered your radiant orbs, his heart has been filled with a consuming affection for you. For years he has been happy in the contemplation of your surpassing loveliness. He has basked in the sunshine of your eyes, your hair is more beautiful to him than gold, your teeth more precious than pearls, your lips more priceless than rubies. Have pity, Clara—pity on your lovesick Sam. Clara, will you be Sam's wife?"

There, "Sam," you can cut this paragraph out and send it to "Clara."

❦❦❦

"Bobs."—Doctors all agree in telling us that we do not eat sufficient fruit, which is infinitely more productive of health and beauty than sweets and pastry. Ripe apples are especially healthy, and children may eat them without danger. Some doctors say that an apple at bedtime produces sleep. Pears are liked better than apples, but are not so healthy, unless cooked. Prunes have medicinal qualities which cannot be denied. They are better cooked, however. Apricots are also more healthy cooked than raw. Peaches are very healthy. The most healthy of all fruit, however, are grapes. Gooseberries and currants are best cooked. Figs are also excellent; they were in great favour with ancient Roman ladies, who always ate them for breakfast. Pineapples are said to be the best cure for dyspepsia yet known. Oranges are also excellent as a cure for dyspepsia. Lemons produce cheerfulness and prolong life.

❦❦❦

"Telescope" (Burnley). — The longest name ever given to an English child—and it is to be hoped, to any child in a civilized country—is Anna Bertha Cecilia Diana Emily Fanny Gertrude Hypatia Inez Jane Kate Louise Maud Nora Ophelia Quince Rebecca Starkey Teresa Ulysses Venus Winifred Xenophon Yetty Zeus Pepper, daughter of Arthur Pepper, laundryman, and Sarah, his wife, who was born at West Derby, Liverpool, on December 17th, 1882. The Rev. Ralph William Lyonel Tollemache-Tollemache had a fondness for long names. His eldest boy was christened Lyulph Yderallo Odin Nestor Egbert Lyonel Toedmag Hugh Erchenwyse Saxon Esa Cromwell Orme Neville Dysart Plantagenet.

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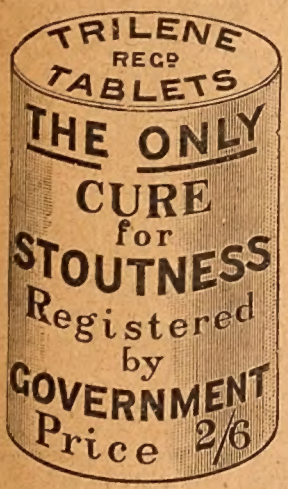

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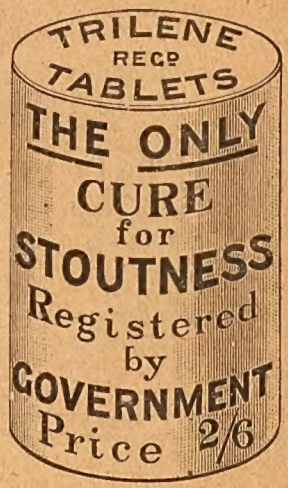

SAMPLES OF TESTIMONIALS.

87 Alexandra Road, Norwich, October 19th, 1896.

Gentlemen,—In reference to Trilene Tablets, I may say that my wife found the greatest possible benefit from the use of them; their action was rapid, and exceeded our utmost expectations, as they were also most beneficial to the respiratory organs. My wife was many years growing so stout, but although the disease was, I consider chronic, the Tablets soon reduced the same completely. You have our united thanks, and if I can do anything to promote your interests I will freely use my utmost endeavours to do so.

"Yours faithfully, J. R. CANHAM."

Mrs. DARNLEY SMITH, Landscove Vicarage, Ashburton, writes: "Trilene Tablets have reduced my weight very much. I am so much lighter in every way, and better in health."

COUNTESS SECKENDORFF, of Berlin, writes: "The Tablets greatly benefited me personally, and I am recommending them to friends."

Miss CHATTERTON, 7 Salisbury Villas, Banstead, Surrey, says: "I weighed 12st. 8lb., but am now 11st. and getting much better."

Nurse CROUCHER, at Mrs. Bennett's, 14 Buckleigh Road, Streatham, says: "I lost 9lb. from the box I took."

"77 Hindhill Street, Heywood, February 5th, 1898.

"Gentlemen,—I have not quite finished the box of Tablets and am 2lb. lighter. The change is great, and several friends are beginning the treatment, which not only reduces fat but strengthens rheumatic joints—such has been the case with me. "Yours sincerely, M. A. HEYWOOD."

Mrs. D. BURTON, of Silverleigh, Tunbridge, writes: "I am very pleased with difference in size, my friends all telling me how much thinner I am getting."

Miss NORTHLEDGE, The Laurels, Risholme Road, Lincoln, says: "The Tablets reduced me 1st., so that I am cured."

West Cornforth, Ferryhill.

Mr. WM. USHER says: "A sister of mine, who was 17st., was greatly reduced by your Tablets to 15st."

Extract from *The Lady*, September 3rd, 1896: "Many stout persons have suffered untold agonies in unavailing efforts to reduce their bulk, either by means of severe dieting, or by taking more or less deleterious drugs; but all these pains would have been saved if the had only invested in a box of the wonderful Trilene Tablets which are quite harmless, containing neither mercury, arsenic, nor any other mineral poison, and which are an unfailing cure for obesity."

Mrs. T. BOSTON, Cambridge Villas, Clifford Street, South Wigston, says: "I congratulate you on your wonderful Tablets. My weight at first starting them was 11st. 7lb., and I now weigh 9st. 11lb."

Mr. MCLEOD, 44, Calside, Paisley, writes: "I have been cured. If you want to know my weight now, it is 10st.; reduced 1st. 8lb., and I am quite content."

A. M. PRATT of Ongar House, Ongar, says: "My weight is so much reduced it is unnecessary to take more. The reduction of weight was from 12st. 6lb. to 10st. 4lb."

Mrs. H. COX, 28 Watnall Road, Hucknall Torkard, writes: "The box of Tablets has reduced my weight 1½ stones."

Mr. WALKER, 236 London Road, Hazelgrove, Stockport, says: "I have used one box and am 14lb. lighter. Send another soon as possible."

Col.-Sergt. WHITTLE, of East Lancashire Regt., Burnley, Lancs, says: "A man in our regiment in 1891 lost several stone from taking your Tablets."

Mrs E. ALEXANDER, 102 Dixon Street, New Swindon, says: "They have reduced me quite 2 stone, and I am now quite cured."

Mrs. W. A. RADFORD, of High Street, New Brinsley, Eastwood, writes: "Before taking Tablets I was 46 inches round waist, now I am 32 inches. I hope soon to be 23. I could hardly move or get up, now I get about easily. Please use this as you wish."

Countess FURSTENBERG, of Germany, writes: "They act speedily and well."

The Princess LIECHTENSTEIN writes from Landsberg, Austria: "Pray send me your excellent Tablets."

Mrs. WEAVER, of Greenpits Villa, Ross, Hereford, writes "I am reduced from 13st. 8lb. to 11st. You may use this if you like."

Mrs. CROSSLEY, of Rose Hill, Torver, nr. Coniston, says: "There is a very decided diminution of fat. I am delighted, and cannot speak too highly in praise of Tablets. My heart is better, and I can breathe so much easier. You may refer to me as often as you like."

Lady C. CONRAD writes from Wiesbaden: "I am very pleased with your Tablets."

Mrs. TAYLOR-ROBINSON, of Tweed Green House, Whalley Range, Manchester, says: "I feel so much lighter and better since taking your Tablets, and am so much thinner that I hardly recognise myself."

Miss A. LONG, of 9 South Parade, Waterford, writes: "Your Tablets have reduced me 14lb."

Miss A. DAWSON, 62 Orchard Street, Weston-super-Mare, says: "Glad to say the Tablets have sufficiently reduced me. I shall always recommend them."

Miss F. L. BALL, 47 Chesterfield Road, St. Andrews, Bristol, writes: "I am quite cured through your Tablets. They improve the figure, and greatly relieve shortness of breath."

Miss PATIENT, of Woodberry, Hayden Bois: "Feel great benefit from Tablets. I have lost 2 st. and am sufficiently reduced."

Mrs. DREW, of 1 Bellevue Gardens, The Nursery, Devizes, writes: "I took Tablets some years ago; they soon reduced me and I have not got stout since. Send me a box for my mother."

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